

杉原智則
イラスト●3

烙印の紋章 XII

あかつきの空を竜は翔ける(下)

Rakuin no Monshou

– Emblem of the Branded –

- Volume 12 -

**The Dragon Soars into the Sky at Dawn
(Final Part)**

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3

[Baka-Tsuki]

これを、最後にする。
だから、テレシア、許してほしい。
ガーベラ国王女として、メファイウス皇太子の婚約者として、
これが最後の恥になる。

ガーベラ国第三王女
ベリリーナ

今度の戦はおれ自らが戦功を飾らねば。


エンデ公国次期大公 エリック・ル・ドーリア



万にも、『敵』が暴挙に出るようなら、
この『敵』を討ちます。

メフィウス皇女
イネーリ・メフィウス





アリオンの小覇王 **カセリア・ジャミル**
突撃準備！
ラツバを吹き鳴らせ。
敵をひと息に呑みにかかろぞ。

偽りの皇太子
オルバ

アリオン軍をダイランより駆逐せよ！





杉原智則

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大陸中央部



Central Continent



PROLOGUE

The sun was blazing down.

Why?

It wasn't in the far distant past - it wasn't even all that long ago. It had only been two, three years at most – looking back on it, Orba remembered far stronger sunlight that seemed to broil the top of his head, and with it, the taste of blood, bitter and like rusted iron, and the anger that raged through his heart.

It had been from that time onwards.

When a brand that would never disappear had been burned onto his back.

Along with other men in similarly tattered clothing, Orba had been brought, practically naked, to the town plaza.

The sun was overhead.

As he stood there, hands tied behind his back, encircled by the sharp tips of spears, dozens of slave traders passed in front of him. All of them raised an eyebrow when they saw his face.

“You a criminal from some other country?” they asked.

Orba didn't answer. He simply glared at them from the other side of the mask. Even when the soldiers yelled at him and prodded him with the butt of their spears, he kept his mouth stubbornly shut. Smiling coldly, the merchants all lost interest and left quickly.

In those days, Mephian slaves did not only come from Mephius; there were many foreign criminals brought back by merchants who had gone to trade overseas. They would pay money to government officials in those countries for criminals who were in prison awaiting execution, then have them shipped over by boat.

Eventually, a fat merchant stopped in front of Orba.

“Show me your teeth,” he ordered, jerking his flabby chin but, like every other time, Orba refused to obey. That merchant, however, jabbed his fingers into Orba’s mouth.

Orba bit them.

The merchant screamed, and brawny soldiers immediately rushed up and hit Orba around the neck area. Looking down at Orba who was crouching silently, the fat trader said disgustedly – “The teeth certainly seem solid.” Blood was dripping from his fingertips.

“Hey hey, Mr Tarkas, you going to buy him?” laughed one of the other traders who had walked past Orba. “According to what’s written, that mask was fixed in place by a sorcerer’s spell. Who’s to say you won’t be cursed if you bring that back.”

“It’s fine. That’ll be a selling point as a gladiator.”

“He’s not fit to use. I’d expect a cocky brat like him to bite the dust from the get-go.”

Tarkes simply tilted his head, attached to his meaty neck, and laughed without saying anything in reply.

Afterwards, soldiers grabbed hold of his arms and dragged Orba along the road. Those in the same situation walked in a line in front and behind him. Most of them were silent.

The townspeople were indifferent to the somewhat strange scene. Men strode along while, right at their feet, children dashed about laughing. Women, who seemed to be their mothers, were standing around, chatting. While merchants were talking business by the shopfronts whose eaves were lined up on either side of the road.

It was the world that Orba had once been a living part of. He too had strutted down the street as though he owned it, brought things from the shops with what little money he had, heard the laughter of children, and was ogled by housewives with too much time on their hands.

But now, even though he was walking along the same streets, he had been torn away from that world. The shops, the children, the women... none of them made any sense to him at all.

Orba was now a *thing* belonging to a world of blazing sun, dusty wind trailing at his

feet, and the feel of iron pressed against his face.

A slave.

He had become a slave.

He was flung into a cart along with the other slaves and they travelled like that, pulled along by dragons, for two days. The sun's merciless heat beat down incessantly. Time and again, Orba struggled violently. His arms and legs had lost their freedom, yet each time he writhed in agony, as though to tear off the ropes that bound his wrist and the chains around his ankles, the soldiers beat him down again.

The bitter taste of iron in his nose and mouth, and the sun always overhead.

They finally arrived at their destination: training grounds jointly owned by the Tarkas Gladiator Troupe and other slave traders.

This was Orba's new world.

All around, half-naked men were grappling or fighting with wooden swords and shields. Muscles rippling, sweat flying, then the agonised groans of whichever man it was who had been beaten down. In a corner of the grounds, elderly craftsmen were hammering iron armour into shape, their eyes apathetic. Caged dragons, howling fiercely, were being transported around him.

Although the grounds were partitioned off on the east side by a tall fence, women with gaudy makeup were standing side-by-side. They were probably prostitutes returning from work. Some of them were pulling young children by the hand. These women in patched up clothes were watching the men train just to kill some time.

"Hey hey, if you're that weak-kneed, you'll be done in no time, yo."

"Become a man who makes money and come buy us, okay!"

The women revealed their dirty teeth and waved their scrawny hands as they laughed coarsely. Stifling anger filled his heart. That anger was the proof that Orba was now separated from that world which lay just one step beyond the fence. Once upon a time, he too had been 'on that side'. He too should have been looking at 'here' from the other side of the fence, feeling as though he was looking at ferocious animals.

The sunlight was strong, even dazzling.

Training began the next day. The man who introduced himself as Gowen let Orba hold a sword. Orba was confident pretty in his own skill, so he was thinking of killing this guy and escaping. Yet the sword he lunged with sliced through thin air. Nor was that all –

“What? What’s wrong? A short guy like you should always be moving. If you even stop to attack, the weight difference will soon destroy your centre of gravity. Like this!”

As he staggered under the weight of the blows, his legs were swept away, or his shoulders were pushed back, and, every time, he was pathetically sent falling.

“Gotten used to the taste of dirt yet?” Gowen jeered as he thrust the sword towards Orba’s throat. Orba had just magnificently fallen on his face. “In less than an hour, you’ve been put in your coffin more than twenty times over.”

The tanned soldier was over fifty years old. Yet, although the young Orba was drenched in sweat, Gowen wasn’t even out of breath.

“You might think that death would be preferable, but... too bad. You’re no longer free to do anything or have anything. Be it your name, your social position, the clothes you wear or the food you eat – everything will be granted to you by others and you can only wait with your mouth open wide, like a baby chick. And yes, even your life. For a slave like you, even your life belongs to someone else.”

He suddenly jerked Orba’s chin up with the tip of the blade.

“You want to take it back? If you want to take it back, become a swordsman who earns money. Everything that was sold with money can be bought back with money. Got it, Tiger Boy?”

From the depths of his throat, Orba growled like a beast. He rolled over the ground, grabbed a rusty shield, and swung it overhead to strike Gowen.

In the instant in which Gowen was caught by the suddenness of the attack, he hurled the shield at him and started running in the opposite direction. He avoided the men who were clashing with each other, sometimes pushing them away, as he plunged further and further into the training grounds.

The wind crashed against the iron mask and roars arose on either side of him. He arrived in a place where countless cages were lined in rows. Dragon scales shone dully from the other side of the iron bars.

“Move!”

Breaking through the side of them, the figure of a slender woman and a high wall both appeared in sight. Conveniently, a ladder was propped against the wall. A man who seemed like a worker was at the top, probably repairing cracks.

Orba was going to leap onto the ladder.

At that moment, something swiftly tripped him from the side and he went tumbling. His mask hit both the wall and the ladder, but he clung to the latter without stopping to worry about it. Which was when somebody caught him from behind by the scruff of his neck. He would have fought back but whoever it was lifted him up with inhuman strength, and, in only a second, Orba’s feet were floating in mid-air.

He was once again thrown to the ground.

He looked up into the white light of the sun. Against a backdrop of dazzling sunlight, two faces peered down at Orba.

“We’ve got us a lively newcomer,” a man with messy hair like a lion’s mane, and whose huge body was blocking the sun, said to his neighbour.

“For once it’s a handsome man, don’t be so violent with him,” a slender, long-haired man chuckled unintentionally. He was probably the one who had tripped Orba up.

“A handsome man? He’s hidden behind a mask, you can’t see anything about him.”

“Oh my, oh my, your distant ancestors were probably dragons or man-eating Geblins, so it’s so very like you not to care about the finer details. But unlike a common, average person like you, I, who am from the higher classes, have a ‘third eye’”

While the long-haired man was pointing at his own forehead, the guards belatedly came running. Orba was forcibly made to stand then put through another baptism of kicks and blows. He could no longer resist against them. The harsh sunlight continued unceasingly to burn his skin and wounds.

At long last, that white tyrant which raged from the sky turned the colour of blood, and hid itself behind the mountains.

Orba was groaning from on top of a bed. His entire body was on fire. An old, hunchbacked doctor had given him basic medical treatment. The doctor had not spoken a word and had left silently after mechanically completing his work.

“Is it done?”

A long-haired man appeared in his place. He was one of the pair which had been peering down at Orba earlier.

“It’s not exactly rare for guys to try and escape, but still, there aren’t many who do so from the first day of training. And let me tell you that most of those guys don’t have long lives.”

“...”

“What? Did you say something?”

“The ones who don’t live long,” Orba spoke through gritted teeth and swollen lips, “are the bastards who meet my eye. You included.”

The man smiled faintly and shrugged.

“It’s good for boys to be ambitious. But if you want to meet the requirements for that, you’ll have to kill ten, twenty men who are out to take your life. Your own opinion is irrelevant. Although it would be good if you could hold on to that ambition even as you’re smothered by your opponents’ blood and corpses.”

I’ll hold on to it – Orba closed his eyes for a second then suddenly opened them wide.

Staring up at the ceiling, which was hidden in shadows, he felt as though the sun was still burning him from the other side of it. Tomorrow again, it would no doubt be fierce. It would burn his skin, and the top of his head, and his face which was hidden behind the mask. Orba focussed his entire being on that invisible sun, as though he were glaring at the future itself.

Seeing Orba go silent, the man shrugged once more, as though in amazement, but, just as he was about to leave the room, he turned around.

“Ran said something interesting earlier. Ah, she’s the girl that you passed by when you rushed into the dragon pen. That girl doesn’t go in for idle chatter... Actually, that was pretty much the first time I’ve heard her voice, you know?”

“...”

“She said that ‘even when that guy came, the dragons didn’t get nervous.’ Anyway, for her to actually speak is rarer than rare, so you should remember it. Even a single element of support is a lot for a gladiator. It can help keep your heart strong. Especially if you get to thinking that you’re special.”

“...”

“Who knows if that fate won’t be cut off tomorrow, or perhaps the day after, but... since you’re interesting, won’t you tell me your name? I’m Shique. That big guy from earlier is Gilliam, and the old man who taught you the sword is Gowen. Welcome to a world of eviscerated entrails and dark pools of blood, boy in the iron mask. Let’s hope our acquaintance lasts for as long as possible.”

CHAPTER 1

CREEPING SHADOW

PART 1

“So hard...”

The trembling voice crept along the cold stone floor. Transparent teardrops trickled downwards as though chasing after it.

“I’ve tried so hard to forget that day. To tell myself that it was all just a dream. That I had a sweet dream about promising a happy future with someone. Then I had a bad dream that tore it all up in one night. I was finally, truly, managing to convince myself of that... Even though I was finally starting to forget... When he appeared in front of me again.”

“...”

The only one listening to Layla’s soliloquy was Vileena Owell. The third princess of Garbera and fiancée to Crown Prince Gil of Mephius, she stood rooted to the spot as she listened to the truth behind Gil’s past, unable to interrupt.

“Even though he had caused me so much pain, even though he’d casually pushed me from the summit of happiness straight into the pits of despair simply because he found it amusing to do so.... he looked as though he didn’t recognize me at all. Not just that, the second time I met him, he acted like a completely different person from the crown prince I knew.”

Layla was no longer looking at Vileena. She herself probably did not know who she was talking to anymore. It was as though the words poured out along with the emotions welling up from the very depths of her heart, all while her shoulders, lips and voice trembled.

“Ah, but that’s no wonder,” Vileena was startled by the sudden smile which appeared on Layla’s lips. “He died. He was shot by my father and killed. Even for a crown prince, once his chest was pierced by a bullet, there’s no way to come back to life. That’s

someone else. That can't be the Crown Prince of Mephius. But then... then, why? Why did someone with the same face as him appear and take the crown prince's identity? To torment me again? Even though everything's already been taken from me, that still wasn't enough? Then, is that why Father was hurt? Or else... it's not me, but to deceive the princess? Did he appear to make her suffer the same thing as me? No, not just the princess..."

Something pressed strongly against Layla's mouth, blocking her voice inside within.

It was Vileena. Before she had realised it, the Garberan princess was hugging Layla to her chest. Layla's entire body trembled violently, exactly as though she was rejecting Vileena; but the princess wrapped her arms around her back even tighter and Layla, sobbing even more bitterly than before, pressed her cheeks against the younger girl.

It was not true, however, that while enveloping Layla in her own warmth, Vileena herself was calm. At this point, it was difficult to believe that Layla was deliberately lying. And yet... that "that" Gil Mephius had forced his right to the first night on a girl of the people, and that Layla's father had shot him dead because of it – the 'truth' that Layla was telling her was simply too far removed from the reality that Vileena knew. The contradictions raged through her slender chest like a storm.

Died... He... died? It was a feeling that she too was familiar with. Back in Apta. She had not been able to believe that they had been parted for all eternity. And in actual fact, Gil had nonchalantly returned as though nothing had happened.

Then were there similar circumstances to the the 'truth' that Layla was talking about?

To hide the shame of having used his right to the first night, he pretended to die... No, that didn't add up. It couldn't add up. Vileena's thoughts were in complete disarray.

Desperate to find an answer, she cast her mind in every imaginable direction, but no matter how far she followed every thread of thought, she always came back with nothing.

Someone else – As sharply as something slapping her cheek, those simple words suddenly burst to the surface of her mind. The same words that Layla had blurted out earlier.

That's impossible.

Yet for some reason, those frivolous words that she had discarded from the start had taken on a strange sense of reality, like a snake abruptly raising its sickle-shaped head.

Vileena had heard comments that Crown Prince Gil was like a different person compared to the past. A great many comments.

Indeed, there had been rumours even in Garbera that Gil Mephius was a ‘fool’. That he showed no ambition to take part in government or military affairs, and simply spent every day racketing about with his friends until late at night. He was apparently constantly terrified of his father’s very shadow, and even the retainers looked down on him. Although he was still young, there had also already been more than just one or two scandals involving women.

Because of that, Vileena had, from the bottom of her heart, despised the thought of marrying that ‘fool’ Gil, and, before leaving Garbera, she had energetically decided to train him to bend to her will, and so bring about victory for her country.

However –

Once she had actually arrived in Mephius and met Gil face-to-face, he had been like a completely different person from the rumours.

Certainly, he had also been very different from all the other aristocrats Vileena was acquainted with. They had even yelled at each other once because of a difference of opinion. He was definitely extremely eccentric, but he was not the feeble-minded man that rumour had made him out to be. He was, in particular, completely hopeless when it came to women. Or rather, he gave the impression of being uninterested in playing around with them.

Rumours heard from abroad are really untrustworthy. Yet no sooner had Vileena been forced to that conclusion than the Mephians themselves all started agreeing on one thing:

“The crown prince seems like a completely different person from how he was before.”

Among them, there were some ladies who whispered to the princess that, “this is a perfect illustration of how a layabout who could never go to sleep unless dead drunk is transformed by marriage into a splendidly hard-working man. The crown prince must surely be pushing himself to become a mature adult before your wedding, Princess.”

She herself, however, did not agree with that.

It's impossible to suddenly become that kind of person. He must have been like that long before meeting me.

But then – why?

Why did the crown prince transform so abruptly that the retainers were left staring wide-eyed?

At that moment, scenes appeared in Vileena's mind. As quickly as one scene seemed to flicker and light up, it merged into another, then another.

Their first meeting in Seirin Valley. Even though she had offered him her greetings, Gil Mephius had not given her any direct response, but had simply mumbled the words that his aide, Fedom, had whispered to him.

Afterwards, Ryucown's men had barged in on the ceremony and just when the princess had seemed about to be kidnapped, Gil had given his own men and the gladiators exactly the right orders to prevent that from happening.

That same evening, there had been the scene that Vileena had suddenly remembered just a moment earlier, when they had yelled at each other.

“The royal family started this war of their own accord, without considering their people's feelings, but they now claim to take them into consideration by ending that war? Those exalted, high-born nobles hold the lives of the commoners entirely in their grip, huh,” Gil had spat out, causing Vileena to fly into a rage.

He might have come across as a man who thought about the people and about the ordinary troops, yet when subjugating Ryucown, he had stood by and watched as the Garberan and the rebel forces clashed without sending a single soldier in reinforcement. When she had pointed out the contradiction, Gil Mephius had been almost ridiculously upset. That man who sized things up so infuriatingly calmly; that man who, when it came to battle, seemed to toss away personal feelings to somewhere underfoot, in a ditch, or wherever.

“For now, we have to wait for the right time,” he had finally managed to bite out, looking as though she had touched a weak point in his heart.

Right, a weak man.

That was another impression that Vileena had of him.

The next scene which rose to her mind took place on the topmost floor of Apta Fortress, against the backdrop of early evening, where a man was kneeling, alone and in tears. It was the first time she had seen anything like that. A man sobbing out loud. And as it had been none other than Gil Mephius, the princess had felt more shocked than words could express.

The recollections still would not end. There were scenes which had been indelibly seared into her mind, and a great many others which had done nothing more than lightly graze its surface, only a few fragments – a casual word, a certain gesture – remaining in her memory. They went so fast that not even Vileena's eyes and ears could follow them. Before one scene even came to an end, the next one would start, so there was no sense of time and space, with each scene blending into the others.

Amidst them, something strange happened.

"It's the same for everyone."

Next to the princess, who was sitting down, was the figure of a man standing beneath a clear blue sky. He was smiling dazzlingly.

"What is our real self? Doesn't everyone live their lives without knowing the answer? Or without knowing if there even is an answer? Royalty, philosophers, priests, peasants, merchants, and even slaves – everyone grieves over their own situation; and not knowing what to do with themselves, they dream that there exists a true calling for them. 'Who am I' and 'who will I become' – those kinds of worries are as countless as the stars in the sky, and will follow you around endlessly."

The one who had said that had been the gladiator, Orba. A man whose face was hidden behind an iron mask and that she had thus never seen. And yet, right now, in the image that flashed through Vileena's mind, he had removed the mask. His face seemed to be buffeted by the wind and as dazzling as looking up into the sun.

Startled, she hurriedly tried to pull that scene back to her consciousness. She wanted to 'see' it one more time, before it drifted away.

"Princess."

What appeared before her 'eyes' however was a scene from yet another memory.

"I hope you will never lose that honesty. No matter what happens from now on."

This was Apta once more. It was dusk and Gil Mephius, wrapped in its golden light, had spoken those words on the topmost floor of the barracks.

But – why was it? Maybe it was because of confusion born from too many memories revolving too quickly, but to Vileena's eyes, it looked as though Gil was wearing an iron mask.

"Then, will you promise me?" She heard her own voice from far away. "From now on, would you confide in me without concealing anything? If you do, I will help you to the best of my poor ability."

"Yeah. But," he laughed lightly. "Don't forget one thing. Mephius' Prince Gil is a 'liar'."

His figure merging into the evening sun, half of Gil's face seemed to shine the colour of iron.

The curtain fell on the theatre of her memories with terrifying abruptness. So much so that she was left reeling from it. There was nothing more. The words, gestures and scenes from her memory all vanished from her mind, and Vileena was left behind, alone.

For a moment, it felt as though her thoughts went blank, but her heart started thumping wildly as if to fill in that empty space.

Perhaps... she thought.

It can't be – she denied it in the next second.

But like a wave surging forward, that *perhaps* came back again, her doubts erasing the *it can't be*.

The clash between those two emotions did not last as long as her reminiscences had. The second one gradually grew weaker, and a suspicion that she could barely acknowledge entered her heart.

She remained unmoving, caught up in that inextricable tangle. Before she realised it,

loud footsteps were fast approaching.

Gowen rushed up the tower staircase.

He was the one who had given orders to only a few soldiers to guard Layla, who was locked up in there. And late that night, he had received a report from those very soldiers. They had been told that a young man named Alnakk, who had started serving the princess, had recently been sniffing around about Layla. On top of that, the lady's maid who had given them that warning was said to have entered the tower to help Layla wash herself.

"A lady's maid?"

The soldiers had surely believed that she had been sent by Gowen but, of course, this was the first that Gowen, himself, had heard of it. He figured it out instantly.

The princess!

He had hastily headed towards the tower. The door leading to the topmost floor was ajar.

Gowen gnashed his teeth. *I knew it, I shouldn't have said anything* – he thought.

Layla appeared to know the previous – or rather, the real – crown prince, so her very existence was liable to bring danger to Orba. In actual fact, she had already turned a blade against him and tried to kill him, but he was more afraid of the knowledge she possessed becoming a danger to Orba's inner circle than of any sword coated in poison that she might wield.

Once the princess learns about it... the magnificent deception would come to an end.

Shit, if only we had a smooth-talker around. It was unlike Gowen, but his mind conjured up the face of a man who was not there, who could no longer be there. Poor talker that he himself was, he was not at all confident that he would be able to mystify the princess.

With no leisure to worry about it, Gowen leapt and landed on the top floor.

“Now, Layla,” a woman’s voice could be heard. Princess Vileena’s voice.

The princess guided the sobbing Layla to the bed and covered her with a blanket. “Please rest for now. I’ll cast a magic spell on your pillow so that you won’t be bothered by bad dreams.”

She blew on the pillow – it was probably a Garberan way of coaxing children to sleep – then turned her gaze towards Gowen, who was standing ramrod straight in the doorway. Her tenderly smiling face turned all at once into an angry expression as she approached him, her eyebrows lowered.

Gowen gulped unconsciously, but before he had time to put himself on guard, she said:

“At the very least, provide her with a bath.”

“Huh?”

“She insolently pointed a blade towards His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, so I will not ask you to treat her with courtesy. However, she also served by me for a time, so at the very least, I would expect that she be treated in a manner befitting a woman.”

“...”

As Gowen remained silent, Vileena walked towards the door, as much as to say that she had finished her business there.

“I was hoping to hear of the circumstances, but what she said was quite incoherent. If anyone outside were to hear her, they would not think her sane. Furtively hiding her away like this, however, is more likely to attract needless attention from those around. As it did mine...”

For a moment, Gowen glanced between Layla, asleep on the bed, and Vileena, who was walking down the staircase.

Well then, this is... the veteran soldier and former overseer who made even tough gladiators tremble in fear muttered inwardly. She’s just no good at acting, so it seems pretty clear she learned something. Hey Orba, in that case, should I be warning you that there’s now another person whose mouth needs to be sealed, or should I be advising you to just run away at once with your tail between your legs?

The opponent was the third princess of Garbera. Someone who might well be an enemy far more difficult to handle than Mephius' Emperor Guhl if she were to stand in Orba's way.

PART 2

The troops led by Zenon Owell took up position at a point eight kilometres east of Dairan.

The way was barred to the north by cliffs projecting out onto the sea, and to the south, by steep, craggy mountains where almost no vegetation grew, so this mountain pass was the only road through which an army could march along. Allion's second wave of troops, which was moving from the east via the country of Ryalide, could naturally only approach Dairan by following this route.

Prince Zenon of Garbera had hastened to bring reinforcements. He commanded a thousand two hundred soldiers from his own Order of the Tiger, three hundred from the Order of the Badger, and about seven hundred from the western allied forces.

After conferring with Lord Eric, the next grand duke of Ende, they had undertaken the responsibility of halting Allion's second wave of troops, which was advancing along the overland route.

Their opponents numbered three thousand.

The enemy held the numerical superiority, but they could not possibly have foreseen that Garbera would take part in the fighting. One glance at the white flag of Garbera that was currently flying above Zenon's head, and maybe they would lose their fighting spirit...

While he was not actually optimistic to *that* extent, neither did Zenon believe that the fighting would become particularly fierce. The enemy was facing a long-distance campaign, and simply maintaining their supply line was a huge cost in time, effort, and money. Even if they called on Ryalide's assistance, they could not be planning to remain stationed there for any long period of time.

And if we can just block their way... In other words, if they could prevent the enemy from joining with Kaseria's main body of troops, anchored to the north in Zonga, then Zenon estimated that they could win the war.

After taking up position, they had erected palisades against horses and dragons, and had installed three canons on high ground. Airships had also been flown to scout out the surrounding terrain.

A few days passed. It was now around the time when Lord Eric was still waiting impatiently for Kaseria's troops to make a move.

The riders sent out on reconnaissance returned, fiercely lashing their horses. They had caught sight of Allion's army.

"They've arrived?"

Zenon had been in his pavilion, reading through some old books that he had brought from his own country, but hurriedly put on his armour when he received the news.

"Finally, huh."

Outside the tent, Moldorf and Nilgif, the Red and Blue Dragons of Kadyne, already had their horses lined up and their long spears at the ready. The end of Moldorf's lance was divided into three prongs.

"By the way, I still haven't heard," his younger brother, Nilgif, spoke in a carefree tone, "what about the enemy general?"

Even though war was close, Zenon grinned involuntarily. There were two reasons for that.

The first was because he remembered how Nilgif, although technically taking part in the war meetings, had spent each of them with his eyes closed and his arms folded. One might have believed that he was plunged deep in thought, except that the quiet, even breathing coming from him within less than five minutes had attested to the fact that he was asleep.

And as for the other reason – it seemed to him that when Nilgif asked "what about the enemy general?", he was not particularly enquiring about the enemy's personality or about what kind of tactics he used, but simply wanted to confirm "who is it I should be aiming for?"

Putting on his helmet, its plume casting a shadow over his virile features, Zenon answered in an even voice.

"According to the scouts, the enemy commander-in-chief is Phard Chryseum. He uses his mother's family name, but, apparently, he is Prince Kaseria's older half-brother. He is said to be a fearless commander who has taken to the field a countless number of

times and, every time, he's torn through the enemy's vanguard and left behind mountains of corpses."

"Oh, sounds fun!"

"Don't be pushy, Nilgif," his older brother reproved him. "We're fighting in a foreign country. We might be here as reinforcements, but this is a gathering of many powers and acting however you want by yourself might completely disrupt command. In this war, I won't let you rush off ahead of me."

The three companions spurred their horses forward to the front lines. It looked as though the enemy had started setting up their battle formations less than two kilometres away, down the mountain pass.

The enemy – Allion's forces – was also receiving reports from its scouts.

"The flag of Garbera?" growled Phard Chryseum. Since he was sucking the meat from a rib, his voice sounded strangely stuffy.

Beneath the battle flags of famed commanders flapping in the wind, his black cloak swayed gently. A woman's profile was embroidered in silver thread within its lining. Although his build was chubby, the two arms protruding from his armour were magnificently muscular and he was a man who gave off the same feeling of oppression as a small mountain. He was practically baby-faced and habitually wore his fluttering golden hair tied back.

With a pop, he pulled the bone out from his mouth then licked his lips that were shiny with grease.

"It's gotten interesting. Garbera's all about that, isn't it – those chivalry guys. I always wanted to see what it was like."

"Please wait."

The man who stopped him as he seemed about to immediately rush off was so thin he almost seemed to exist as a contrast to Phard. In his blue hooded robes embroidered in red thread, he was unmistakably one of Allion's non-combatant military sorcerers. His face looked as though only a thin layer of skin was stretched over his skull.

"What, Morga?"

The man did not flinch even as Phard glared at him in displeasure.

“We have not yet completed our preparations. If you would wait but a short while, I will open a ‘passageway’ so we can communicate with Prince Kaseria.”

“As usual, that sure is convenient,” Phard’s manner changed abruptly. He seemed to be the kind of man whose interest switched with dizzying speed to whatever was in front of him. “Can I talk to Kaseria directly?”

“It would take time... No, not just an hour or two, but the time to prepare adequate facilities and ether supplies. And on top of that, you would need to receive training in sorcery, Lord Phard.”

“Talk about needing patience,” Phard’s forehead creased into a frown. “If you want to train your arms, just carry something heavy. If you want to strengthen your legs, just run while doing so. But I can’t even guess how you’d train to strengthen yourself in sorcery.”

Although he was grumbling, Phard seemed willing to wait for the ‘sorcery’. Crunching on the bone with his sturdy jaws, he swung a heavy battle staff and started whirling it above his shoulders as though it were as light as a feather, probably intending to kill some time. Near the tip of the staff, a considerable number of iron balls hung from chains. They made a humming sound as they spun, and the nearby soldiers yelped and scattered away from their general to avoid being hit.

Morga left quickly and entered the tent reserved for his preparations. He was something like a staff officer attached to Phard; in Allion, it was not unusual for sorcerers bearing that kind of role to accompany troops.

As soon as Phard grew tired of swinging his weapon around, he retired to his pavilion and went to sleep, wrapped in the same black cloak. Loud snores could soon be heard from there, although something very like sobs were occasionally mixed in with them. His attendants had often witnessed how he would press his cheeks against the embroidered woman’s profile, practically wailing as he did so. Incidentally, the embroidery apparently represented Phard’s mother back in her younger days. While you would be forgiven for thinking that they had been torn asunder by her early death, she was still perfectly healthy. It was just that this huge man of nearly thirty missed his mother.

Night fell, soon followed by the dawning day.

At breakfast, Phard appeared for all the world to have utterly forgotten the previous day's conversation and to be about to give the signal to attack, when the sorcerer Morga knelt by his side and started giving his report.

"Oh?"

What Morga was conveying were Kaseria's instructions, which they had only received late that night. Had they been using airships or fast horses, it would, of course, not normally have been possible to communicate so quickly; this was the work of sorcery.

"This is enemy territory and ether is scarce, so we cannot open a 'passageway' here," said Morga.

The further they were from Allion, the longer it took to prepare and the shorter the messages that could be transmitted, but for most people, who were not well-versed in sorcery, it was certainly a means of communication that defied common sense.

In any case, Phard listened to the instructions from Kaseria, nodding frequently.

"My little brother really is smart," he gazed in the distance towards where the enemy had pitched their camp. "It's fun to fight head-on, but killing a *fleeing* enemy also makes for an exciting battlefield. Both get my blood pumping. Right, we'll wait."

He flopped down and set his custom weapon beside him.

"Ooi, you lot! No war for now. Have a drink."

Wine casks were immediately opened. His men looked as though they were going to waste no time acting on Phard's generous suggestion and filling their wine cups to the brim.

"Hmm," after a moment of deep cogitation however, "if we're going to be waiting for the enemy, we might not have enough to drink. Wait, wait, you lot! No alcohol. No, it's not that I won't hand it out. Let's have a kabat. Only the one who wins gets to drink a cup."

Kabat was an ancient form of combat from the Magic Dynasty that had been handed down in Allion. A circle drawn on the ground was used as an arena. The contestants grappled bare-handed, and the winner was the one who pushed his opponent backwards on the ground or out of the circle. Trained soldiers usually performed in

front of crowds of spectators at festivals held several times a year.

“Don’t worry about it being your superior officers. If I catch anyone going easy, I’ll come and be their opponent.”

While Allion’s camp was displaying this peculiar turn of events, in the opposite camp, Zenon Owell was puzzled at the enemy having halted their actions.

Having heard that battle was drawing near, Nilgif was so wound up that he seemed unable to sit still, and he was incessantly putting horses through their paces nearby. Had Zenon not been the commander of the allied forces, he too would have wanted to start at once.

While Nilgif was getting excited, his older brother Moldorf was like a boulder as he sat cross-legged. He carried a spear under one arm and looked ready to spring into action at any time, but his expression was as tranquil as could be.

He handed the kumis he was holding to Zenon, who happened to pass by.

“You should calm down.”

His attitude was entirely like that of a commander, and it was with mixed feelings – part astonishment, part envy – that Zenon took the alcohol.

“Nothing will come of you getting as impatient as the men are.” He jerked his chin towards where Nilgif was rebuking a subordinate even while galloping his horse. Although he was a considerable distance away, it felt as though the dust he was sending flying had enough force to reach them.

While looking at the scene, Moldorf seemed to be saying with some self-derision that he was used to this. Zenon let slip a chortle. After which he dropped down next to Moldorf, who glanced at him from the corner of his eye.

“There’s maybe no point asking now, but I heard that Garbera and Ende had clashed near their border. And then, not that much time later, here you are rushing to help them.”

“I have the same kind of question. I had heard that the west was a land of never-ending conflicts. And yet now, you’ve joined hands and come to Ende’s assistance.”

“That would be thanks to King Ax, the leader of the Confederacy, being so capable... and also, to Mephius.”

“Mephius?”



“You don’t need to bring up the history of Taúlia to know about the long state of tension between Tauran and Mephius. The one who broke through that like it was nothing and suggested an alliance was, of course, that Crown Prince.”

“Of course,” Zenon chortled softly again. “The mastermind who pushed you into marching with our troops. That thoroughly irritating brat.”

“Exactly,” Moldorf washed down his drink with a gulp then laughed loudly. “Even though everything he says sounds upright, does he himself even actually believe any of it?”

“He seems like the sort of man who’s a reliable ally but a dangerous enemy.”

“We’ve actually crossed spears. Well, to be precise, it wasn’t the Crown Prince himself but one of his men who was probably acting on his orders, but anyway....”

“Oh!” Zenon Owell’s eyes gleamed with interest.

Moldorf told the foreign prince about the battles in the west and, while he was describing one of the scenes, he added, “he’s certainly a dangerous man, but, well, it’s nothing to be too worried about. Sure, I was defeated once, but if there’s a second time, I’ll win.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s a child. And it’s because he’s a child that he pulls off all these things that adults wouldn’t think of. But once you know that, an adult has ways of dealing with kids.”

“Ha ha ha, I see. I definitely caught a glimpse of immaturity when I talked with that crown prince in person.”

“It’s fine while he’s green,” Moldorf heaved a sigh reeking of liquor, “his immaturity is just about his only charm. But once he becomes an adult and loses even that charm, I’m worried he’ll become the kind of foolish ruler who doesn’t trust or confide in anyone.”

“Hmm, well, it’s another country’s affairs so I can’t really say it with confidence, but...” Zenon’s bright smile was very like him, “on that point, I’m fairly sure things will be fine.”

“Hmm?”

“Because you know, that crown prince has got my little sister with him.”

Having said that as though it answered everything, Zenon put the leather flask to his mouth for the first time. It smelled strange, but he drank deep without worrying about it.

PART 3

At around the same time, Orba, as Gil Mephius, left Solon with a thousand three hundred soldiers and arrived in Idoro to the east.

Before doing so, he had notified Ende that they would be responding to their appeal for reinforcements, but the reply he received was truly vague. That probably meant that Eric, the next grand duke, was away from the capital, Safia. With Ende not yet having transitioned to its new regime, communications were likely to be slow. With no reply forthcoming, and since he had been afraid that if he waited too long he would be too late, Orba had moved swiftly.

He was met in Idoro by the domain-lord, Julius. He too had been in Solon during the direct confrontation between the Emperor and Crown Prince, but he had returned earlier to his territory since Prince Gil would be leading his forces through it.

“I did not have the opportunity to present you with my greetings in Solon,” he said with a smile.

Day after day, a long succession of people presented themselves before Ineli and Fedom, who were seen as points of contact with the Crown Prince, hoping for a chance to meet the heir to the throne and to fix themselves in his memory, so Julius felt that luck was on his side to be able to meet Gil face-to-face like this.

“If there is anything you lack, please just grab the person concerned and let them know. I will be delighted to provide you with anything, be it weapons and armour, provisions, or even if you want women... Ah, but hold on, Your Highness has Lady Vileena, the perfect wife for you. But if, perchance, anything improper were to occur, allow me to say with confidence that my lips would be sealed firmer than the sacred iron gates in the Ryuujin Tribe’s underground ruins at Avort. Ha, ha, ha.”

It was probably because his mood was so good that his jokes were in poor taste.

Right, thinking about it, we have met before, huh – Orba meanwhile only remembered Julius to about that extent.

During Gil Mephius’ first campaign, just before they had headed to Zaim Fortress to subjugate Ryucown, they had held a council of war here in Idoro. Julius was a man known for his harsh treatment towards slaves, and it was because he had been on the

verge of executing the slaves from Tarkas' Gladiator Troupe, who were travelling with the troops, that Orba had saved them by ordering that they temporarily be hired as his own Imperial Guards.

Looking at it that way, there was no particular relationship between them.

Orba received Julius' welcome but did his utmost to ensure that his men didn't cut loose too much.

Three days passed while they remained in Idoro. During that time, another messenger arrived from Ende.

Isn't there a single sensible guy in Safia?

Had Kaseria left Zonga? How far had Allion's second wave of troops, taking the overland route, already approached? In this situation in which he didn't even know that much, time crawled by as slowly as a snail.

Perhaps because he could sense Prince Gil's state of mind, Julius showed consideration. "To ease the Crown Prince's boredom," he organised a gladiator performance.

When he heard about it, and even though Julius' messenger was right in front of him, Orba clicked his tongue.

Completely unnecessary – he thought, but in Mephius, it was the custom to organise a gladiator contest when one was receiving a person of higher rank to one's town or castle. A noble's ability was then judged on how many gladiators he could summon, and on how long a show he could stage.

Orba really wanted to excuse himself by claiming that he wasn't feeling well or something, but Julius was the domain-lord of an important city. From now on, Gil Mephius would not be able to avoid socialising with him.

I'll be meeting plenty of people I don't agree with and having conversations about things I don't go along with. – He grudgingly decided to set off towards Idoro's largest amphitheatre.

Given that it was about gladiators, he chose Pashir, Gilliam, and 'Orba' as his attendants, three men that the Crown Prince had elevated from their ranks. In this

case, 'Orba' was, of course, the former gladiator Kain, hidden beneath the iron tiger mask.

"So, how's the way I'm walking? It's exactly like Orba, right?"

"Not at all."

In the reception room reserved for aristocrats, Orba's expression was sour. The three that were there with him all knew about the relation between the 'Crown Prince' and 'Orba'.

"Yeah, it's spot on," Gilliam gave his stamp of approval. "You've got the same stooped shoulders he had, back when we were gladiators. The way you hunch up your chin is also exactly like he used to."

Pashir remained silent, but the faint smile at the edge of his lips showed that he agreed. Although he had an official position separate from this, he would invariably take it upon himself to go as a bodyguard whenever the prince went anywhere.

"Yep, I've been observing Orba and practicing," out of the blue, Kain smugly started teasing Orba.

"Self-training is fine and all, but you're an Imperial Guard. Wouldn't you rather be fawned over under your real identity? If 'Kain' stands out for his great deeds, being popular with women or earning a fortune won't be just a dream anymore."

This was ironic coming from Orba, whose real name and face were always hidden.

"Say, Orba," yet Kain's expression was extremely serious when he answered. "I was just a small-time pickpocket. From the time I was born, I've never had parents or relatives. And then I got caught by the guards and from the next day onwards, I was a gladiator. I lived one day at a time, not knowing if I'd see tomorrow. That's 'Kain'. The guy you and me both know well."

"..."

"So I intend to fully enjoy life as someone else when I'm 'Orba'. It's fun, you know? And if we're talking about being popular with women, putting on that iron mask is way more efficient than trying to flirt with them with just my real face."

“From the way you’re saying that, you’ve done it before, huh?”

“Ah... no... well, once or twice, maybe...” Kain’s eyes went shifty. “But...”

“But?”

“Say you go from being the crown prince to becoming emperor, and you don’t plan on ever revealing your identity as Orba,” Kain started with a preface, “and so when I’m a grandfather, I’ll have the iron mask hidden in my house. And say, one day, when my grandchildren come to play, they accidentally find it. ‘Wow, Grandad, are you actually Orba, the masked gladiator?’ they’ll ask, their young eyes sparkling, at that time, I’ll neither admit nor deny it. And that way, I’ll be leaving tantalising hints.”

Orba thought that was a pretty long-term dream, but he did not say anything. Men all had plans for what to do ‘afterwards’ with their lives.

Just before noon, they were guided to their seats in the amphitheatre. Maybe because Julius had advertised it, there was a good attendance for the hastily organised performance. Gil’s group was lead to the special lodge, which had pillars supporting a stone canopy. With Pashir, Gilliam, and ‘Orba’ fanned out in a row behind him, Gil Mephius sat next to Julius, the domain-lord of Idoro.

“Those who are about to die for His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince and for His Excellency Lord Julius give their greetings!” An elderly man announced resoundingly.

Bathed in sunlight, a row of muscular gladiators each raised one hand to their chest and bowed their head.

It was a very familiar scene. Simply from seeing it, a burning emotion welled up within Orba. What came with it were not tears, however, but a feeling of wanting to throw up.

The gladiators all carried wounds, great or small, on their bodies, and their faces were dark from dust, but their eyes as they looked upwards shone just as brightly as the sun that was blazing down on them.

It was not the Crown Prince they were looking at. No, they were staring at the ones standing beyond him, at Pashir and ‘Orba’. Each of their chests burned with fighting spirit and with the hope that they too might be appointed Imperial Guards if the Crown Prince was pleased with them – that their days of living hell might all at once give way to the freedom that they could not help but yearn for, and that, at the same

time, they might obtain the status and honour that, as gladiators, they would not be able to achieve in all their lives.

Before long, the life-and-death struggles began before Orba's eyes. For all that he looked on as expressionlessly and apathetically as possible, the crash of steel, the spurts of blood, the beastlike howls in their death throes – everything grated on the former gladiator's five senses. One after another, the memories revived.

The training grounds always reeked of the stench of fodder and dragon dung. Amidst the clash of roaring voices, Orba, drenched in sweat, brandished his sword and repeatedly took aim at the overseer, Gowen.

Although they were encircled by a high fence, there were lattices on the east side and, through the gaps, they could catch glimpses of the world beyond. The training grounds and their buildings were by no means within the prosperous part of town. Quite the opposite: they were next to the slums. The people that went by were children with grubby faces, prostitutes with patched clothing, and peddlers selling goods of dubious origin.

Freedom...

Orba craved it every bit as much as he did the food and water he needed to survive. Perhaps even more so. It stretched out like a glittering blue sea. The freedom to walk along the streets, the freedom to run along them, without anyone having decided his destination for him. The freedom to peacefully fall asleep after the sun had gone down, without anyone ordering him to fight to the death the next day.

Even if he had more gold than he could carry, he would gladly have exchanged it for that. Even if that freedom was just the freedom to beat up those he didn't like, the freedom to steal and to keep running away until he ran out of breath, the freedom to collapse without food or money and to die by the roadside.

He had thought about escaping again and again. On nights before a fight, lying on the hard ground, he would wonder – *Tomorrow, will I be sleeping in this same place alive and healthy?* He had spent many a sleepless night endlessly, obsessively going over it in his thoughts. And then, greater than his craving for freedom, greater than his fear of death, more implacable than any other thought –

Revenge.

Amidst the excited cheers, Orba leapt out like a wild animal let loose from its cage. In front of him was an opponent who would try to take his life – to snatch away his future which consisted only of a single day at a time.

Swords crashed against one another. Red and blue sparks scattered and flew.

“The game is over!”

The announcer’s voice reverberated above Orba’s head.

He suddenly went rigid. In his hand was a blood-stained sword, right before his eyes rolled a now silent corpse.

A hallucination.

In reality, as Gil Mephius, Orba was looking down from on high at both the winner and the loser, lying dead and shrouded in blood. Having won the tournament, and even though he had a dark red scar roughly at the level of his heart, the winner raised both hands and gave a roar of joy.

Barely an hour earlier, a row of men had stood before Orba with shining eyes, yet now, this was the only survivor.

“Magnificent,” Orba stood up and praised the victor. “It’s a privilege to witness such a display of warrior spirit before heading to the battlefield. An omen of victory, surely. You are appointed an officer of the Imperial Guards. No objections, Orba?”

“From a brave of his calibre, I expect splendid deeds,” ‘Orba’ respectfully replied. He knew his script on this stage.

As a matter of fact, the young man who had won was not as splendidly skilled as ‘Orba’ claimed. Luck, however, was on his side. It had blessed him from when the combination of fighters was decided, and the opponents that chance had decided for him were all ones that he could handle.

Put otherwise, it was simply luck that had decided the life and death of these men, and luck that had separated their ‘afterwards’ into light or shadows. Orba had promoted him neither for show nor on a whim, but because he anticipated that making an ally of luck was as good as roping in a hundred strong soldiers.

Eyes brimming with tears, the young man bowed towards Gil Mephius, then once more shouted from exhilaration.

Orba received Lord Julius' salutations, then left the amphitheatre. He felt as though, just like that young man, there was a dark red gash across his chest.

The sun shone down from up above.

Yet by the time that dazzling sun had sunk below the mountain ridge, then risen again over the world of men, the young man who should have become an Imperial Guard had met with the same fate as the slaves he himself had killed for the sake of his freedom and future.

His master and companions had apparently thrown an all-night banquet to celebrate the start of the hero's new life. When morning came, he was stretched out flat, his face pale. He was already dead by the time he was discovered. It was thought that the wound he had suffered the day before had taken a turn for the worse.

Orba received the news early in the morning.

"I see," he said. He did not have anything particular to add, and ate his breakfast.

A man with no luck – he thought to himself.

Or perhaps he had used up all of his luck?

Orba tried hard to recall how he had fought and how he had shone with delight when told that he was appointed as an Imperial Guard but, in the end, Orba could not even remember his face.

He was unlucky...

Not only Orba, but also most of the people who knew of the young man's fate thought the same way. However –

First one.

There was one man, his lips curled into an evil smile, who held a different opinion. He

claimed to be a merchant who had travelled far from the distant west.

His name was Zafar.

He was a sorcerer who had once served Reizus, when the latter had taken the name 'Garda'. In Birac, he had lured Layla, Vileena's lady maid, into attempting to assassinate the crown prince.

The old man's connection to Orba ran deep, yet this time as well he had turned up on a street corner in Idoro, feigning harmlessness. Next to him walked a woman who was also from Tauran. She was pretending to be Zafar's daughter, and her name was Tahī. She was a sorceress who had likewise served 'Garda' and who had thereafter schemed to assassinate Ax Bazgan, the leader of the western alliance.

Both had failed in their attempts but had met up here in Idoro.

"The Revered Elder has allowed us the deaths – has allowed us the manipulation of the fates of up to twelve people. First is one who became an exalted sacrifice of flesh and blood. This time, failure will not be tolerated. Tahī, you understand, don't you? We cannot act recklessly."

"There will be no mistakes," Tahī smiled faintly.

A hood covered her head and she wore robes long enough to cover her entire body, but even though her figure was almost entirely concealed – or perhaps, *because* it was concealed – her every gesture was alluring.

Idoro was at the time in a fervour over the Crown Prince's visit. Rumours of his audience with Emperor Guhl had already spread throughout Mephius. The main character from that heroic legend had arrived with an army, so the populace had gone in droves to surround Julius' mansion, in the hopes of catching even just a single glimpse of the Crown Prince; and when his men went out, they followed them around in groups, even though they had no business with them.

Zafar and Tahī arrived at the foot of the tower which served as the launch pad for air carriers. The entrance to it was on the other side of a fence.

Perhaps there had been some kind of news, as the area had been busy since just after noon that day. Slaves were moving a number of huge cages; within them were dragons.

“Oh, it seems that the prince will be leaving soon. We need to hurry.”

The cages were being transported into the tower, probably ready to be loaded onto carriers. It was a job that usually took time and manpower since dragons locked up in the same cage were prone to becoming enraged and acting violently. The dragon handler must have been a good one though, and every single one of the scaly beasts, large or medium-sized, were quiet, not letting out a single howl. Even now, a person who seemed to be the handler was running between the cages and calling out to the dragons.

It was, needless to say, Crown Prince Gil’s personal dragon tamer, Hou Ran.

“That’s...” Tahī’s red lips parted.

Zafar realised a bit too late. From the area around Tahī’s forehead, a sudden, crimson ‘wave’ seemed to materialise. It was hard to know how to describe it. It resembled both wispy smoke and a watery whirlpool, although an ordinary person would not have been able to see it in the first place. Just as this ‘wave’ that baffled description seemed to be revolving before Tahī’s forehead, it suddenly shot free and flew towards the dragon handler who was in front of the tower.

For a second, Ran stopped moving. Tahī’s lips curled upwards into a smile. This was her signature, flame-summoning magic. Just now, however, it did not take the shape of a ‘flame’ but was more on the level of a wave of heat. Even so, a direct hit had enough power to inflict a burn.

Ran, however, immediately gave a supple swing of her arm. Zafar saw the ‘wave’ disappear like smoke dissipating in a strong wind. It was an astonishing phenomenon, but perhaps Ran herself was unaware of it, since, after looking around blankly for a moment, she returned to her work with apparent unconcern.

Tahī’s expression turned angry.

“Don’t go too deep,” Zafar stretched his hand out in front of her face as he spoke. “I’ve only just said not to act recklessly.”

“It was just a preliminary test,” Tahī said teasingly, but her eyes were not smiling.

Zafar shot her a sharp glare.

“Once I move into action, you just need to hold her in check. We don’t yet know the extent of that person’s power or their true identity. Sooner or later, we will have to uncover them, but now is not the time.”

“I understand,” Tahī answered without looking at Zafar. Her eyes still stared straight ahead, as though they were piercing through Zafar’s hand, held before them like a shield, and still held Hou Ran in sight.

“I see,” she then muttered softly. “I understand why the Revered Elder gave me those orders. *That* is the same as me...”

PART 4

During Gil Mephius' stay, a succession of incidents occurred in Idoro.

In each of them, people lost their lives. Nothing about them raised any particular suspicions, however. They included a drunkards' brawl, a cheating husband stabbed to death by his wife after he was found out, or business talks that turned sour before ending in mutual killing. Although you couldn't go so far as to call them everyday occurrences, these kinds of cases were by no means uncommon, and it was simply coincidence that they all happened around the same time.

Such trivial matters naturally did not reach Gil Mephius' ears.

Second... third...

Which meant, of course, that each time an event occurred, each time a body was discovered, Orba had no awareness of the whispering voice that seemed to be tallying them.

It was a sort of 'shadow' that prowled through Idoro at night. Merging with the darkness, it wandered through every nook and cranny of the fortified city. And it unfailingly caught the 'scent' of every incident that was on the verge of unfolding.

When, not long ago, a group of new mercenaries, who had recently arrived in Idoro, got into a quarrel with a more experienced group in a bar along one of the back alleys, the 'shadow' had softly crept in. And it had smoothly slid up to a wife who was thoroughly fed up with her carpenter husband that went out fooling around every night.

The shadow had started whispering. It was the very faintest of murmurs, that only those involved in the incident were able to hear.

When the long-serving mercenary approached a newbie with a wine cup in one hand, the voice that said – *He'll kill me if he sees an opening* – had sounded like the voice of his own mind. When the wife had half-resigned herself to her husband having affairs, it had whispered – *It's about time to teach him a lesson. Right now, he's entranced with a younger woman. Sooner or later, he'll take all the money in the house and run off, leaving me behind.*

The second they heard the voice of 'their awareness', they felt their emotions well up like fire within them.

What was left behind afterwards was a corpse.

And the mercenary, the wife, and every other person who became an assailant could only look down in a daze at their blood-covered victims.

Each and every time, the 'shadow' whispered its count and left without a trace, wandering back into Idoro's night, in search of the next 'scent'.

One night, when the crown prince's flagship, Dhum, was weighing anchor at Idoro's air carrier departure point. The cages had been loaded into the ship's hold, and the dragons had all lain down their heads and were sleeping peacefully.

Hou Ran had thus finished her work, and was now staying the night in the same place as the dragons to help them feel reassured in this unfamiliar environment. She was lying at the centre of the hold, wrapped up in a single piece of cloth.

There was nobody else there. Several soldiers were on watch outboard, but none of them noticed the dark shadow crawling beneath their feet.

Once on board the ship, the shadow unhesitatingly made straight for its destination: the hold where the dragons' cages were lined up. The 'shadow' turned its formless gaze towards the centre of the room, where Hou Ran lay stretched out. In the starlight that shone through the window, her hair seemed to shine with a strangely pale lustre.

The 'shadow' whispered something. Although Ran's eyelids fluttered and quivered for a second, her sleep remained undisturbed. A few of the slumbering dragons in the cages on either side of her had a similar faint reaction, but they too continued to sleep peacefully.

The next day, the morning brought uproar in one area of Idoro. Preparations for departure were almost complete when a corpse was found in an air carrier which was scheduled to fly before noon that day.

A woman's corpse.

It went without saying that Orba received a report about it. He rushed over there.

“Ran...”

When he called out, the woman he had known since their time with Tarkas’ Gladiator Troupe turned around.

“What happened?”

“Hmm, I don’t know,” she shook her head.

The reason Orba had asked her was because he found it surprising to see her among the onlookers.

The body belonged to a young slave woman who helped take care of those who worked at the port. Her aggressor had already been arrested by the guards; he was the second son of the harbour master. Even though he was her master, he had long held wicked thoughts towards her. Having summoned her to the ship in the middle of the night with orders about a job to do, he had forced her down but, because she had struggled violently, he had instinctively struck her.

Ran irritably paced around the cabin in which the incident had occurred.

“What’s wrong?”

“It stinks.”

“Stinks?”

“Yeah, but... I don’t know. Where did it come from... where did it go... A nasty stench.”

Orba, naturally, did not have any understanding of the ‘stench’. He had not been informed of anything concerning the succession of incidents in Idoro, and even if he had, it was doubtful whether he would have connected them to the affair that had occurred onboard the ship.

After all, Orba was in a hurry.

They had finally received an answer from Ende. A military officer living in Safia, who had long been part of Eric’s faction, was concerned about the way Prince Gil was being made to wait at the border. Overriding the high officials who were dragging their feet, he made the judgement call to accept the prince’s request to be allowed into the

country.

“It was Lord Eric himself who issued the appeal for reinforcements to Mephius. There is no need to wait for his reply,” by the time he had convinced the higher-ups, a messenger had already been sent to Idoro.

After meeting with him, Orba had hurriedly finished preparations for departure. Having Ran move the dragons was part of them.

From times immemorial, sailors on ships sailing the sea or sky had loathed incidents involving women, and it was an ominous event that had occurred the previous night. Orba, however, had laughed at the frightened men, and the ships had risen into the sky at the scheduled time.

After crossing the river east of Idoro, it would take half a day to reach the border fortress. However, they could not proceed to Dairan as they were, and would need to leave the Dhum at the riverside fortress. The aforementioned military officer had apologetically explained that this was the last-minute compromise they had managed to hammer out to have the reinforcements be allowed to pass.

“They said that without direct confirmation from Lord Eric, we cannot allow ships from another country to freely fly our skies.”

“It’s fine. Then could you have some of your own ships readied for us?”

Orba had a good impression of the officer, who must have been about twenty years older than he was and who handled things well. Ende was a country with a very old history, and the long years had brought stagnation which, like rickets^[1], had warped the personality of its nobles. Eric, however, was young and had been raised, sword and armour wet with blood, in a rough region far from the centre of Ende. Yet only very few people would already have felt the influence of this new mood.

Leaving a few men to guard the Dhum, Orba transferred to Endean ships to travel north. If speed was the priority, it would have been best to split the soldiers up and have them ride in small and medium-sized ships. As was to be expected though, such a large variety of boats was not what had been prepared; instead, there were two large ships.

Air travel was convenient, but it had taken them about five days to reach the final relay-base before Dairan. By that time, the sun had already set; it was only a short

distance from there to Dairan, but it was not advisable to fly by night.

They decided to stay overnight at the base.

CHAPTER 2

IGNITION

PART 1

It was the dead of night, and Dairan, surrounded by its high ramparts, was as silent as it always was at that time.

Or so it pretended to be.

The gate was thrown open. Leaving through it was a force led by Lord Eric. This was done in consideration of the possibility that there might be enemies in the area, spies from Allion, and to make them believe that they were just conducting regular reconnaissance.

Kayness, the current head of the Plutos House, was not in his bedroom but in his office, sitting perfectly still in a formal posture. His eldest son, Darowkin, was also in full armour. He was waiting on standby at the centre of the city with seven hundred soldiers, ready for if the prince sent a call for reinforcements.

The troops which launched themselves from the gate, excluding those led by Darowkin's younger brother, Belmor, were essentially Ende's national army, although almost all of them were soldiers from Dairan.

If our prince is going to battle, it probably won't be before dawn.

There was still time. Their hearts were not pierced by any feeling of tension. The soldiers of Dairan were use to sudden outbreaks of battle, so the rows of faces beneath the helmets were as calm as could be. Their enthusiasm, however, was strong.

Lord Eric himself was just as eager. *In the coming war, I need to personally complete feats of glory.* Since he would be carrying Ende from now on, he needed to demonstrate his own might to those both inside and outside of the country.

It was the same for the Dairan soldiers. Even though they carried out the duty of defending the north, Safia, in the centre, criticised them as "barbarians" and "country bumpkins," and had, up until now, kept them away from politics.

“Now we’ll show them the mettle of Dairan men!” A lot of soldiers were getting fired up.

Until today, Lord Eric of Ende in Dairan, and Prince Kaseria of Allion, who had halted in Zonga, had been confronting each other in a silent standoff. This was not like Allion, which had only just come out of a long military campaign. Some had even wondered if they were going to pull up camp without crossing spears so much as once.

Yet Eric had now left Dairan with a troop of one thousand.

They had obtained information from captured spies that Kaseria had sent out. According to that, Kaseria had already led a select few south of Zonga. There was an unoccupied fort to the northwest of Dairan, and they were apparently planning to hide themselves there. After that, a large-scale force would be deployed from Zonga, and when Eric left Dairan to confront it, their plan was to attack him from the flank.

If I can strike at that fort first... Eric believed that he might be able to kill Kaseria with little effort.

This was information that two of the eight spies had revealed under torture that threatened to take their lives. It was not surprising that it was deemed trustworthy. And the information was certainly no lie: they had spoken the truth because they wanted to live.

Eric, however, did not for a moment consider the possibility that the “truth” that the spies had been taught was, itself, a lie...

Those spies were the ‘dogs’ that Allion’s prince had released from Zonga, in the north. Out of eight of them, not a single one had, in fact, been born in Allion. Quite the opposite: all of them had once been secret agents from enemy countries – such as Dytiann or Atall – which had once slipped into Allion.

When their identities had been discovered, each had been thrown into an underground dungeon, yet they had not been killed on the spot. Rather, they had been kept alive. For a very long time – more than ten years sometimes, depending on the person – they would be kept alive in a small and filthy prison cell.

Then one day, all of a sudden, a new person would be thrown into the cell that had

turned into their living quarters. A woman. Moreover, a woman who had been born and raised in the same homeland as them. Allion had secretly kidnapped them.

A man who had endured solitude for so long that he had been on the verge of losing his mind, and a woman who had abruptly been torn away from her family and carried off to an unknown, foreign country. A man and woman from the same hometown. Almost inevitably, the two would be drawn together. They would exchange private wedding vows. Before long, a child would be born.

Thereupon, Allion would move them to different living quarters. Naturally, soldiers kept a strict watch on them, but at least the place was larger than the dungeon cell and provided them with a bare minimum of humane living conditions.

Another two or three years later, depending on the case, they would meet a high-level Allion official for the first time. "I have a job for you," he would say.

The spies could not refuse. Their family was being held hostage. Even if this had been the aim all along, even if it was a family that they had deliberately been made to create, they could not go against the feelings that had instinctively developed.

Allion called them 'dogs'. 'Dogs' picked up from another country that could easily be thrown away. They had cost them in time and money but, since these were not spies that they had originally trained themselves, the men had practically no information about Allion, and it didn't matter if they were slain once they had served their purpose.

The eight people who had slipped into Ende were all 'dogs'. They would obliquely be given information that Kaseria would go to a fort north of Ende, and when they were interrogated, they would keep their lips shut tight to protect the 'truth'. Some of them, however would eventually be worn down and would spill it. Thanks to that, the information would appear more reliable.

Furthermore, there had originally been nine spies sent out from Zonga. The one which had not been caught was an agent trained by Allion. When they had been approaching the enemy headquarters dressed in Endean armour, he had hung back to the rear of the group, and had deliberately caused a disturbance to attract the attention of the Endean guards.

Once the guards shouted for them to identify themselves and started fighting warning shots, the Allion-trained spy had, of course, escaped to the north.

Eric had not realised.

The men of Dairan burned with quiet fighting spirit, and just as quietly, the troops moved forward. They forded the River Daivim across the shallows that they had identified long ago, and headed further north.

They joined up with the scouts that had been sent out earlier. A sharp-eyed man knelt before Eric, and a single nod from him was enough to tell Eric what he had to say.

“So they’re there?”

“Aye,” the spy nodded once more. “By the time we started investigating, there were already a number of people coming and going from the fort. At nightfall, some lights filtered through and we heard singing, as though they were having a drinking party.”

“Oh, how bold.”

Eric slowly, steadily approached the fort within the forest. The clouds overhead were dark that night, but moonlight occasionally broke through. They advanced with their helmets removed and the tips of their spears wrapped in cloth. The horses also had wooden silencers placed in their mouths. Dragons, of course, could not be brought along for covert night actions, nor could they bring canons because of the rattling noise of the wheels. Still, they had enough guns, and fire arrows had also been prepared. There was more than enough; nothing was lacking to attack the old fort.

Even so, although Eric was a little hasty when deciding to take action, he was the sort to grow prudent once the troops had started moving. In that respect, his personality was the complete opposite of Orba’s. When he had previously marched on Garbera, Eric had sent scouts in every direction while he rode forward.

This time as well, he started investigated the surroundings once the fort was within sight. The narrow path to the northwest led to a wide valley, with a hill that gave an unbroken view of that valley. Eric had been wary of it. He had worried that Kaseria might have divided his forces in two and positioned them there, with the intention of launching a surprise attack from two directions against the Dairan troops.

He concluded that there were none of Kaseria’s soldiers on that hill.

Eric's prudent nature however brought fortune amongst misfortune: his actions caused Kaseria to become impatient.

At that same time, Kaseria Jamil was concealed north of the fort. With him were a thousand soldiers lying low among the sparse trees, the reflections from their armour and spears likewise hidden. To the east, there was a further seven hundred soldiers, led by Lance Mazpotter, who had taken part in the planning along with Kaseria.

It's not working.

While Eric had been chaffing impatiently in Dairan, Kaseria had discreetly sent people to the fort on Lance's advice. They had carried out repairs to allow soldiers to conceal themselves inside it, and had also transported dismantled cannon parts and then reassembled them.

Currently, however, there were no more than a few soldiers inside the fort. When the enemy charged to take it, first Kaseria, then Lance would strike at the enemy's flank and rear, reversing the intended surprise attack.

If they succeeded, it would be Allion who would be dealing a heavy blow to Ende with very little effort. Moreover, just as Kaseria had hoped, the one leading the troops was Eric, the future grand duke himself.

Such fun.

Since hearing the news, Kaseria had been licking his lips incessantly from uncontrollable excitement. His mentor, Lance, had told him over and over, "Don't take black water lily to the battlefield." Since Kaseria often consumed it, if he had it at hand, he might forget where he was in his excitement and give in to his bad habit.

How should I kill him? Handing him over to that fool, Jeremie, might be fun, but it'll be even more fun to slice through Jeremie's neck and send the severed heads of both brothers to Safia. Yeah, but if I do that, Father would probably get angry. Hmm, what to do...

The enemy was drawing closer, planning to attack the fortress by surprise. Kaseria waited impatiently for the moment when the tables would suddenly be turned on them, his heart thumping in excitement like a child. Be it friend or foe, he loved nothing

more than to make people jump and shout in surprise.

But instead of hurrying, Eric was moving much more slowly than expected, exactly as though he wanted to keep them in suspense, and on top of that, he had started checking in every direction.

Shit!

The enemy's dragnet had not reached them yet, but Kaseria was overly-anxious about those actions. That anxiety was not the fear of defeat: he couldn't stand the thought of someone taking the initiative from him. He should be the one jumping out and yelling. He did not want to miss the opportunity of reversing the surprise attack and making the enemies scream in shock.

As a result, he was too hasty.

"Prepare to charge!"

He threw himself onto his horse, put on the helmet that entirely covered his head, and roared loudly as he brandished his longsword.

"Sound the horns! We'll overwhelm the enemy in one go!"

Ende's side weren't the only ones startled when the sound of horns suddenly erupted throughout the forest.

"What that... That damned brat, it's too soon!"

Elsewhere, waiting on standby, Lance Mazpotter spat out the jerky he had only just popped into his mouth.

Now that the commander had charged earlier than expected, the cannons, which had taken so much trouble to set into place, were rendered useless. Nevertheless, Lance's actions were swift. His foot was already in the stirrup as he yelled encouragements to his men.

He would chew Kaseria out later. At all cost, they needed to capture Eric in this battle or take his head.

"Enemies, enemies!"

“Enemy attack!”

As pitch black groups swooped in to attack Ende’s army from the side and from the rear, voices rose from each direction. And just as loudly –

“Make way for Kaseria Jamil, prince of Allion!”

Kaseria galloped in the lead in his steel helmet, and blood already clung to the tip of the sword he swung.

By nature, he disliked wearing a helmet. It was hot and stuffy, and it restricted his field of vision, but, just as with the black water lily, he had received strict orders from Lance to “Absolutely make sure to wear your helmet,” and he sometimes chose to follow them. This time, given that he had disregarded Lance’s intentions and gone bolting off, it was a way of balancing the books. It was because he also disliked hiding his face that Kaseria was stating his own name like this.

“I, Kaseria Jamil, am here to take the head of Lord Eric of Ende. If Eric wants to prove that he’s a man, let him show himself before me!”

Ende had never dreamed that they would be the ones on the receiving end of a surprise attack and, for a moment, they lost their chain of command. The shadows of night were no longer a cloak of invisibility for them, but were instead like the mouth of some demon which was breathing life into enemies.

Of all of them there, less than a third raised their spears or pulled the trigger on their guns and fought back. Their nerves were probably shaken from not knowing what had happened, and many of them were struck with steel through their necks.

Hit with the successive attacks from Kaseria’s and Lance’s troops, the lines of ranks collapsed all at once, and one after another, soldiers threw aside their spears and guns, and fled.

“Lord Eric,” Belmor Plutos called out loudly as he pulled his horse up alongside Eric Le Doria. “It’s a trap. And it looks like the enemy is Prince Kaseria himself!”

“What?!” amidst the rough voices howling in the darkness, Eric ground his teeth. “Then we’ll align our spears in formation and fight back. If it’s certain that Kaseria himself is here, then victory is...”

“Impossible,” asserted Belmor.

Eric glared at him with bloodshot eyes, but Belmor returned a gaze just as sharp – or even sharper, towards him. Eric felt a sudden stab of surprise.

It’s the same as back then.

During the battle against Garbera, because he had believed that their side had the momentum to win, he had misjudged when to stop. Because of that, Belmor had been captured and they had been put in a position where they could neither advance nor retreat. If Gil Mephius had not taken on the role of mediator, Eric’s luck might have run out there, in foreign soil.

I can’t make the same mistake.

His over-excited brain cooled down all at once; however, the path of retreat to Dairan was already blocked.

Eric considered quickly. He remembered the survey of the terrain that he launched earlier.

“There’s a hill to the northwest. Let’s start with heading there.”

“Understood,” agreed Belmor, and he pulled out his spear. “Then let me serve as the rear guard.”

Eric was about to say something. However, the eyes of his childhood friend, although still as sharp and gazing directly at the him as they always did, now held a different meaning.

“I’ll leave it to you,” Eric said shortly, and with the same preparedness for death.

Belmor’s bearded face broke into a grin. He changed it back to a stern expression, then swung his spear over his shoulder with a shout that was almost a roar.

“Villar, Spirit of Flames, come dwell within me! Men, let the braves who do not fear death step forward and follow behind me!”

“AUGH, AUGH!”

“A, AUGH, AUUGH!!”

As Belmor kicked his horse’s flanks and sped off, a crowd of young men followed after him, raising the war cry that was characteristic of Dairan warriors.

Guided by some of his men, Eric left the place. As he followed the route to the northwest, the regrets and reluctance that he left behind were anything but small.

PART 2

Although Kaseria's charge had slightly modified the plan, there was no doubt that Allion held an overwhelming advantage.

The Ende side, however, showed unexpected perseverance. Although at first their soldiers had dispersed, now that Allion was trying to push forward, Ende was rallying to counter-attack with equal vigour.

The Dairan platoon led by Belmor Plutos noticeably stood out, and there were many soldiers who stood their ground thanks to his actions.

From the outset, Allion had not been able to perform a particularly organised strike, and once it turned into a mêlée and free-for-all, it was impossible to tell who had the upper hand, and who was at a disadvantage. Ende had its surprise attack turned against it, but Allion, who had not believed that they would be able to put up this much of a fight, was equally dumbfounded by their perseverance.

"Shit!"

"Move, you damned small fry! Where's Prince Eric?"

"Oh, small fry, am I?" Belmor laughed as the tip of his spear whirled and jabbed into the enemy soldier's neck. "Five!" he called out, both to give himself encouragement and to show his mettle to the enemy.

What the... – Another purpose was to attract enemy hostility and disgust, and to lure their attention to him.

His spear broke as he slaughtered the sixth.

However, he wrested the spear from the hands of an enemy who had leapt forward, then swung around and jabbed an approaching soldier in the face.

"Seven"

It was a hard fight.

Belmor roared with laughter as his beard was dyed in enemy blood, one strand at a

time.

He was in a kind of ecstasy. The enemies' movements seemed awfully sluggish. The spear he wielded seemed as light as the weightless metal made from dragonbone, and it effortlessly pierced through enemy flesh. He felt as though he would be able to fight for a full day, a full two days, without stopping.

It's as though every one of the spirits has entered my body. No, rather, the spirits are using my flesh as a medium to protect Ende's future.

Aba, the Spirit of Wind, dwelt in his hands and feet; and Villar, the Spirit of Flames, was lodged at the centre of his body, where an inexhaustible will to fight burned strong.

The spirits were breathing life into his spear, his armour, and even his cherished horse; all seemed to come together to construct the warrior that was Belmor Plutos.

"Eight!"

From the distance, Kaseria Jamil heard Belmor's shout.

The charge was not advancing as he had anticipated, and he was starting to feel irritated.

"Eric, where is Eric of Ende?" he drove his horse forward, violently mowing down the soldiers who stood in his way.

Although his frame appeared slender, his fighting-style was fearsome. He twisted left and right, his spear flying wild and vigorous. Ende's spears weren't even grazing him. His horsemanship was as bold as it was skilful; one moment, he spurred his horse to where he could most efficiently slaughter his opponents, and the very next, he had driven it to where their blows had no hope of reaching him.

Lance Mazpotter, then known as the "One-Eyed Dragon of Atall", had once been deeply impressed by his brilliance.

Kaseria had already been thirteen-years-old when Lance first met him. On top of that, he had only ever held a sword in play. Lance was convinced that, as an instructor, he would not be able to make anything out of such a novice.

As for Kaseria, he wasn't in the least bit enthusiastic. Or rather, he hated this man called Lance who did not cave in before him. When they had met along the palace passageways, Lance had not given way to him, so they had collided head on. Kaseria had hit his nose and gone tumbling. "I'll kill you! One day, definitely, without a doubt!" he had bawled.

And in actual fact, when he had first grasped a sword and started training with Lance, Kaseria had attacked him again and again with the intention of taking his opponent's life.

The result went without saying, but in the process, a huge change occurred within Kaseria. Once he had steel in his hand, it was as though he had been familiar with swords from the moment of his birth, or perhaps it was the sword which had chosen Kaseria. The boy who lost interest in any toy within three days, and who broke them as soon as he received them, was completely absorbed in this new game called swordplay.

Lance was equally entranced. Like parched ground absorbing water, Kaseria's body absorbed every one of his teachings. He had never had such a student before. Lance had three sons and had trained them all himself, but although they had some skill, they all fell far short of their father.

This kid...

At the end of their whole-day training, Lance was exhausted. That was how deeply engrossed he had been. Kaseria's power of absorption was nothing ordinary. He was like a bottomless hole.

...has an inborn talent.

Lance, a man who shone more brightly than anyone on the battlefield, who truly felt alive there, sensed it clearly.

He's overflowing with talent for destruction and slaughter.

Lance did not believe in fate, but it was enough to make him think that the reason why Kaseria had not picked up a sword before now was so that he could be the one to train him.

He hasn't picked up any bad habits, I'll hammer my style into him completely.

That was nine years ago.

Kaseria Jamil was Lance Mazpotter's masterpiece.

It was while he was advancing and bringing down a rain of blood on the battlefield that he heard Belmor's voice. When he saw his figure in the distance, he immediately realised that this warrior was the heart of the *rear guard*.

For all that he had gone rushing out, Kaseria was no mere fool. He had already ordered his men to cut off the path of retreat to the south. It was probable that Eric had escaped northwards.

If I get this guy out of the way... Then Eric would be right within reach.

Kaseria smiled astride his horse and pulled on the reins once more. If his master, Lance, had been there, perhaps he would have stopped the prince from charging towards Belmor.

That guy has gone berserk – he might have said.

"If you see a man on the battlefield who is noticeably berserk, even if he only has a small build, don't go near him. I've only seen it a few times in all my life but, very occasionally, there are warriors who will fight like demons when death is upon them. In that moment, those guys can brag of being the strongest in the world, and they'll take scores of enemies with them, without even noticing that they've been shot through the heart. You understand? The trick to surviving the battlefield is to basically work out how not to die yourself by keeping an eye out for dangerous situations and enemies..."

But Lance was not at his side.

Kaseria's sword had already tasted blood. Although he was normally calm and collected, once he saw carnage on the battlefield, there was no turning back. A red fog seemed to cloud his mind, and that dark red impulse urged his body forward independently of Kaseria's will and reason.

"Move, move!"

Kaseria spurred his horse onwards through his hesitant subordinates. Those of his allies who were too much in his way were kicked down by his horse or received a blow

from his spear.

Belmor had also noticed the signs of an enemy galloping towards him like a gust of wind. Someone who wore a helmet that projected forward like a horse's head. Belmor's feelings were close to being friendly towards this enemy who was breaking through to the centre of the terrified Allion soldiers.

"Come!" he gave a single roar and took up position to intercept him. The charging enemy thrust out a spear without any further warning.

In Belmor's current state, he could read each one of his enemy's movements, point by point. From his opponent's position, posture, and speed, he could predict how he would move and from what angle he would attack. A skill cultivated through experience.



It felt as though the trajectory of the opponent's spear was tracing a visible 'line'.

Belmor was about to draw back his own spear to counter-attack while avoiding that 'line'.

But at that moment, Kaseria's strike deviated utterly from the predicted 'line'. He could not hit him.

Kaseria swung the part of spearhandle that he was holding in a sweeping side blow. Struck by a heavy blow to the helmet, Belmor reeled on top of his horse.

The blow was not one that could lead to a fatal injury but with that one strike, Belmor Plutos felt like he had been dragged back down to earth. The Spirit of wind which was supposed to be dwelling in his limbs, the Spirit of flames which was supposed to be roaring and blazing brightly at the core of his body... – vanished abruptly.

"Thil?"

Hearing herself being called, Thil turned in surprise to the quilted mattress beside hers. Reen was peering up at her older sister from the edge of her blanket.

In Dairan, the night was still quiet.

"You're still awake?"

"You too, Thil."

Darowkin's daughters talked in a whisper so as not to wake up their mother who was asleep in the same room.

Thil, the older sister, couldn't sleep well after going to bed, and every time she woke up, she prayed to the spirits. To the many spirits that dwelt in the earth, water, fire and wind, of course, but soldiers also had a custom of naming each spirit that sprang forth from every component of their weapons and armour. So she was mentally reciting the provisional names of the spirits that resided in her father's and in Lord Eric's equipment – the spirits' true names were known only to those who held the armaments.

Eric and Darowkin had naturally not told the two very young sisters about what would be going on that night, but although she was only nine, Thil was still the daughter of a Dairan warrior. She had a premonition that – *there'll be a battle tonight*.

Judging from the mood enveloping Dairan, it would be a large-scale one. Their mother must have sent her two daughters to bed especially early because she didn't want them to become unnecessarily anxious.

"It's alright," Reen grinned, showing her white teeth. "Father taught me how to hold a spear before. So even if the enemy comes, I'll protect you, Thil."

"Silly," the sensitive Thil immediately felt her eyes fill with tears but she forced herself to smile. She pulled the blanket over her little sister. "Now, sleep tight. Since I've prayed to the spirits for you too."

Around about that same time, Eric had taken refuge at the hill northwest of the fort.

Having called a roll-call for each platoon, it was established that they numbered less than five hundred. It was believed that half of their force had been killed in action, had fled, or were even now fighting hard to defend the entrance to the valley.

In short, they had been utterly routed. The young future grand duke of Ende felt like pummelling his fist against the ground.

It was at that point that Belmor Plutos, passing through the narrow path to the valley, arrived at the hill. Or, to be more accurate, that he was carried in.

When he first saw the friend that he had studied swordsmanship and competed with since childhood, Eric uttered a groan wrested from the depths of his throat.

"Belmor."

"I failed," blood oozed from his head as he spoke. A spear must have struck him in the thigh, because it looked as though he could not walk unaided. It was clear to everyone that his life would be in danger if he did not immediately receive medical treatment.

"What are you saying? It's thanks to you going on a rampage that I'm here, safe and sound. This fight was Belmor Plutos' win."

“The enemy...”

“Once we take up formation on this high ground, they won’t be able to break through so easily,” sweeping his gaze around their shadowy surroundings, Eric made a point of smiling. “Sir Darowkin will bring reinforcements at some point. We’ll take that time to charge and catch Allion in a pincer attack.”

“Aye,” Belmor’s face had lost all colour, but he too smiled. “My lord, please keep in mind that you mustn’t act hastily out of concern for the likes of me.”

“I know.”

“No, Prince Eric: you are unspeakably kind. That kindness could become fatal to you. If ever I see you worrying about me more than necessary, I will rip open my own chest to die.”

Eric fell silent.

Meanwhile, Kaseria Jamil and Lance Mazpotter had joined up at the entrance to the valley. Having removed his helmet, Kaseria’s hair was standing on end. His skin was sweaty and flushed, and his eyes were brimming with fiery bloodlust.

Seeing Kaseria so full of enthusiasm, Lance glared at him with his good eye to keep him in check. Just as Eric had said, the terrain was advantageous for the enemy. Even if their side had the greater numbers, there was a fear that they might suffer considerable losses in vain.

“Have the cannons brought over. They’re sure to smoke out the enemy.”

“That’ll take time. Reinforcements will arrive from Dairan.”

Kaseria ground his teeth and his expression made it clear that he wanted to wallow once more in a sea of blood as quickly as possible, and that every second counted. Thereupon, however, he hit on an idea that would not have occurred to some mere foolhardy daredevil.

“Or how about... What if we attack Dairan?”

“What was that?”

“Loosen the net encircling the south for a bit, and let an enemy messenger get through. Dairan will send reinforcements as soon as they hear about the prince’s plight. That will reduce the city’s defences, right?”

“Right....”

“I’ll lead a unit beforehand and go and hide near Dairan, then launch a surprise attack on the troop of reinforcements.”

“ ... ”

“Afterwards, we’ll set Dairan on fire. In which case, Eric will go down as having abandoned the land that supported him. How about it, Lance?”

If Lance had been an ordinary military staff officer, he probably would not have expressed agreement. It was clearly a plan that Kaseria had come up with simply to give him an excuse to fight some more. It was, so to speak, an end to justify the means.

However, while Kaseria could be called twisted, it was Lance himself who had raised him that way.

“An interesting idea,” he said. “If Dairan goes up in flames, Garbera will be lured into taking action instead of keeping our second wave of troops in check to the east. Once Phard’s unit arrives, we’ll be able to sweep them all up in one go.”

“That’s my master for you, quick on the uptake.”

“However,” Lance tossed a warning at the prince whose entire face had lit up with joy, “don’t take your time attacking Dairan. If you can’t deal with the enemy reinforcements quickly, leave at once. If you’re too slow to return, I’ll come and fetch you myself to haul your ass back.”

“I get it, I get it!” as though to show his agreement, Kaseria once more covered his head with the tight-fitting helmet. “Then, I’ll be heading off first. When I send you a signal by airship, unfasten the net to let their messenger out.”

PART 3

Lance Mazpotter pulled back the soldiers who were fighting at the mouth of the valley, and swiftly reorganised his troops. As expected of such a veteran, his skill at this far outstripped that of Allion's prince.

With his reorganised unit, he encircled the hill where Eric's forces were. They stoked up bright fires. From Eric's perspective, it would look as though they were surrounding him with a ring of flames at his feet.

While they busy holding the enemy in one place, Kaseria was leading eight hundred soldiers southwards. They drew near to the river that served as the national border.

Using their spears instead of sticks; soldiers jumped into the water and felt about the shallows. Because they were using the absolute minimum amount of light, there were some who lost their footing and were swept away by the current. They had seven airships with them, but these were mostly being used to transport two cannons. Although aware of the danger, Kaseria himself jumped his horse into the river.

The moon was covered by thick black clouds. It probably didn't want to show itself so as not to have to see the brutal fighting below.

Within that dark night, Prince Kaseria's group quietly approached Dairan. Once they were close enough to see the ramparts, the troops stopped and Kaseria sent out scouts.

"Oh, one of the gates is open?" when he heard the information, the prince's thin, narrow lips curved into a smile as he sat atop his horse.

In that case, the enemy will definitely be coming out through the north gate.

They waited for a while.

Finally, a rider came galloping from the northern direction, flying almost right in front of where Kaseria lay concealed. No doubt the enemy messenger who had slipped out through the opportunity that Lance had deliberately created. He disappeared as though being pulled in by Dairan.

It was obvious even from a distance that the city suddenly burst into activity. The news

flew around that Eric's main force was isolated in enemy territory.

At that point in time, Kaseria divided his force into two groups, and had a further unit stay at a distance with one of the cannons and position themselves to the east of Dairan.

This time, things did not take long enough for Kaseria to get impatient.

They're here.

There was the clip-clop of hooves and Dairan's iron gates spat out a group of cavalry and infantrymen. They numbered seven hundred.

"Fire!"

A few kilometres to the north of the city, the order was given for the soldiers lying on either side of the road to shoot.

It was as though the stillness of night had been torn apart by the roar of thunder.

The screams of men and horses overlapped, and Ende's cavalymen were thrown to the ground with a clatter. When the bullets ran out, Kaseria Jamil personally charged forward in the lead.

"Get them!" he bellowed, then rushed towards the battle front, which was enveloped in thick gunpowder smoke.

The torch carried by a rider fell to the ground. Kaseria's sword reflected it, emitting the dazzling light of flames, as he cut down two, then three of the foot soldiers.

While the elite force that he led clashed with the enemy reinforcements, three hundred passed by their side and headed towards Dairan. Their aim was to gain control of the gate. Befittingly for troops that had put countries to the sword, Allion's vigorous army moved with lightning speed.

A messenger was sent hurtling to the domain-lord, Kayness Plutos, with news that the enemy had successfully invaded Dairan's territory.

"What!?" even a warrior like Kayness went pale.

When he had heard that Eric was isolated, he had felt that the situation was beginning to turn dangerous. He had sent soldiers to fight back, with the majority of the soldiers being entrusted to his eldest son, Darowkin, which had already left. There was no doubt that it was Darowkin's troops which had been violently attacked.

Bastards – Kayness' expression was thunderous as he changed by himself into his armour.

He was fifty-three years old. In recent years, he had not being out to battle, but, as was customary here, he did not neglect his daily training. He called a page to hand him a spear.

Meanwhile –

First, we need to set a grand fire – Kaseria was seeing to it that his attack force carried that out. Having penetrated into Dairan, Allion's army easily got rid of the first lot of soldiers that Kayness had sent, and were now embarking on merciless slaughter and annihilation. The houses were a matter of course, but they also set fire to the granaries in which the people had desperately stored provisions from the impoverished soil.

"Bastards!"

Unable to bear watching it, the men broke free from their families who were holding them back, and grabbed weapons to attack. Allion's soldiers shot them, skewered them, and trampled them beneath their horses' hooves. Spears mercilessly struck the backs of the mothers who were fleeing the fires while protecting their children.

Corpses piled up in the streets of Dairan and, even as the horses' iron-shod feet crushed through them, new heaps of remains were being amassed elsewhere.

The soldiers of Allion's army wore helmets that almost entirely covered their heads. Because of that, they looked exactly like expressionless, emotionless dolls faithfully executing their master's orders, performing one act of destruction after another.

With no way to resist, Dairan was set to the torch. Meanwhile, a few kilometres to its north, Darowkin's troops, which were fighting Kaseria, were shaken by a further problem. The leadership was in disarray, and there were those who looked like they were intending to turn back without permission to defend their city and families.

His helmet and armour red with blood, Kaseria was dashing around the battlefield,

searching for the commander, but the enemy leader, Darowkin Plutos, had in fact taken a bullet and fallen from his horse in the early stages of the fight. He had already withdrawn from the frontlines, pulled away by his men. This saved Darowkin's life, but as a result, his troops were unable to regain their fighting spirit, leaving Kaseria free to trample them down.

With sword and spear, Kaseria put down every obstacle that rose before him. When they were just about to march into Dairan, he got in touch with the unit that he stationed to the east beforehand, and had them start bombarding the city's east gate.

This lured Kayness. Fearing that the enemy was also approaching from the east, he split his soldiers in half. It was, however, no more than a decoy, and Kaseria was easily able to break through the thinned-out ranks of the enemy.

As sparks flew from the buildings on either side, he had the second cannon carried into the city. It's target: Dairan's castle. The convoluted city layout was designed to make it difficult to reach, but the airship unit overhead guided the prince.

The Dairan soldiers, of course, rushed in to attack with sword and spear in hand, but they were outnumbered.

Bathed in the reflected glare from the fires, Kaseria rode along leisurely. His attitude was the same as if the city were already occupied territory. No matter how often his men warned him that, "Riflemen might be lying in ambush," and despite the fact that enemy gunshots did occasionally ring out, Kaseria simply laughed each time.

"Aha ha ha."

He looked joyful.

Kaseria had a cultured side to him that loved paintings and music, and he had even produced works of art himself, but now that he stood on the battlefield, it was as though his everyday self, the one that lived protected by stone walls, was an impostor. It made him realise that the beauty of pictures and the poignancy of music and poetry were no more than substitutes for the rapture of slaughter and that moment of fear, not knowing if he himself might be killed.

Ignoring the townspeople who were trying to flee from their burning homes, Kaseria's unit arrived in front of the Plutos mansion. As was to be expected, soldiers armed with guns were lined up in formation to attempt to defend it. Kaseria lured them out with

infantrymen while the cannon was being placed in position at the rear.

At that same time, Darowkin's daughters were running through the mansion's corridors.

As soon as their mother was informed of the enemy attack, she had jumped to her feet and, accompanied by escorting soldiers and ladies' maids, had taken her two daughters by the hand and had left the room. The mansion, however, was in chaos because of how sudden it was.

Armed soldiers were shouting angrily as they raced along, rushing this way and that. Their lamellar armour^[2] and the handles of their spears seemed about to hit the two girls in the face at any moment.

"Reen!"

Thil hurriedly let go of her mother's hand and stooped down to shield her little sister. Just then, the building shook to the accompaniment of the roar of artillery fire. With the soldiers pushing and shoving, the two of them were separated from their mother before they even realised it.

They simply ran in search of a place with no fire, which brought them to a garden surrounded by a fence. The two of them often played there, and there, the men's angry bellows and the women's screams sounded far away. There was a shed in a corner of the garden, so Thil led her little sister by the hand and rushed over to it.

They held their breath in the darkness.

For a while, they grasped each other's hands and stayed quiet, and amidst the silence, it felt as though they were the only two alive in Dairan.

The shed's window was high up, so Thil piled up what she found around them into a sort of staircase and, from on top of it, tried to see what the situation was outside.

She could see flames rising from all around Dairan and, in their shadowy surroundings, she could vaguely make out that even darker shadows were jostling against one another. The fighting was probably at its height.

“And Father?” Reen stood on tiptoe, looking up. Her hair, which was usually tied up in two bunches, hung to beneath her shoulders, and she looked utterly forlorn.

Thil shook her head.

“Mother?”

Thil climbed back down and sat on the floor next to her sister.

A short while later, Reen asked again,

“Where’s Father?” the usually confident little girl had eyes brimming with tears. “And Mother? Where’s the Lord Prince?”

“I don’t know,” answered Thil, staring down at her knees which she had drawn together. “But, it won’t be long. They’ll come running to find us really soon.”

Finding the silence unbearable, she talked about everything and anything to her sister. She hummed the songs that their uncle, Belmor, always sung.

“Uncle promised you yesterday, right? That when he gets back, he’ll read your favourite book, Reen. And also, he’ll do the fairies’ voices.”

She forced herself to smile as she spoke. Her little sister’s favourite stories involved fairies, and she especially loved it when Belmor put on a woman’s voice when reading them to her. Right now, however, there was no topic that could distract Reen. Hearing her say nothing but repeatedly ask “And Father?”, “And Mother?”, Thil finally couldn’t take it anymore.

“I don’t know either!” she screamed, shaking their clasped hands free. “If you’re that interested, you should just go outside and look for yourself.”

“Fine, that’s what I’ll do,” frowning indignantly, Reen stood up.

Thil did not believe that she meant it. “You can’t do it by yourself, right? So stay here quietly. It’s always, always the same... because all you do is imply nasty things about me.”

“Thil, you’re a dummy. I hate you!”

Reen lost her temper and broke into a run. By the time she startled Thil had stood up, her younger sister had opened the shed door and disappeared into the night. Thil gasped and stood petrified. The darkness that stretched out on the other side of the door seemed to have swallowed up her sister, and she felt as though she would never be able to return to her side.

Her hands and legs had begun to shake involuntarily. She wanted to drop to her knees and wail.

But –

“You too, Thil. You have to protect your little sister.” At that moment, the words that Prince Eric had told her a few days ago spun around in her head.

The girl bit down hard on her lower lip. *I’m the daughter of a Dairan warrior.*

Her legs still trembling, she stepped outside.

CHAPTER 3

DAIRAN IN FLAMES

PART 1

Although isolated within the enemy's formation, Eric naturally did not just stand by with his arms crossed. While sending a messenger to Dairan, he picked the uninjured soldiers and the best out of those who were injured but still sufficiently mobile, and explored ways to descend from the higher ground to the enemy lines.

They were preparing to retaliate against the enemy once reinforcements had arrived from Dairan. As Eric himself had said, if things went well, they would be able to attack the enemy from both sides. If there was a way to climb down behind the besieging enemy soldiers, they would use it to attack from the rear. If that was impossible, then their tactic would be for every platoon to charge down the hill.

It was around then that their camp suddenly erupted with noise.

"Ah!"

"My lord!"

Flames were rising up in the far distance.

From Dairan's direction.

It was obvious that Allion's army had launched an assault on it. For a second, Eric and the soldiers accompanying him were stunned. This situation was impossible. Dairan, against whose solid walls the nomadic riders seemed to bounce back off every time they attacked – Dairan was burning.

Because of my incompetence... Eric's shaking hands clenched into tight fists that trembled even harder.

For the prince, Dairan was far more his home than the capital, Safia. And while his home was being attacked, he found himself in a position where he could no longer hope for reinforcements from Dairan. Since things had come to this, there was only

one path open to Eric's troops.

To prepare to die without surrendering.

Like the tip of a single spear, all they could do was to concentrate their forces on ripping into a single point of the enemy lines. Nothing else.

Naturally, Prince Eric himself had to return alive either to Dairan or to Safia. If the worst happened and Dairan fell, if its people and soldiers were slaughtered to the last, as long as Eric survived, even if he was the only one, there would still be a chance for revenge. If Eric died here, however, that would mean the annihilation of the Grand Duchy of Ende itself.

Therefore, while they would be pouring most of their force into their surprise attack, it could be no more than a decoy. The decoy corps would fight with the all the power of desperation until it was utterly destroyed, during which time, the prince, accompanied by a few guards, would withdraw from the frontlines.

"My lord, please give us your orders."

"Please allow me to demonstrate my prowess in the vanguard."

"Ha, ha, ha, what're you saying, you greenhorn who was living easy in the capital? I'm sure the prince will be kind enough to let this old croak show off my skill as a Dairan warrior one last time."

Every last one of them volunteered to be part of the decoy unit.

Even Belmor, covered in injuries and unable to walk unaided, stood before the prince, using a spear in place of a cane.

"May the spirits of Heaven and Earth manifest their power and forever protect you, Lord Eric, next Grand Duke of Ende," he said, his eyes clear and bright.

Eric wept.

There was nothing he could do but shed tears as he accepted their desperate resolve. Things were different from when he had fought in Dairan as an individual warrior. Eric now represented Ende itself, and his life was no longer his alone.

A few dozen minutes after flames had broken out in Dairan, four hundred soldiers descended the hill, calling upon the names of the spirits, spears, swords and guns in hand.

Less than half of them were still fit to wield steel. Some dragged one of their legs behind them, others had to lean on horses, and others still had to advance by crawling along the ground.

They soon collided with those of Allion's troops that were stationed to the south side. The sound of gunfire immediately filled the surroundings.

Meanwhile, Lord Eric and the fifty soldiers protecting him attempted to break out on the west side.

Lance Mazpotter, who was in command of the encircling troops, reacted swiftly as well.

"It worked."

Lance had predicted that once Dairan was set ablaze, the enemy would definitely descend from the high ground. And furthermore, that it would be as a decoy to allow Lord Eric to escape alone. Therefore, when he heard battle cries resound overhead, Lance gave the first instructions to shoot even as he promptly sent a signal to the airship unit.

Many of Allion's airships, and especially those that seated two people, imitated the form of giant birds of prey. The motif was apparently that of the giant birds that appeared in myths from the Ancient Magic Dynasty. The soldiers on the back seats held up lights. While maintaining a distance between each other, several ships revolved in the sky.

Lance's raised eye watched each of the twinkling lights. Before long, a light flying to the west drew an '8' with its trail.

"There!" Lance cried out, and broke into a run towards it, accompanied by a hundred riders. With a force like the wind, he easily left the bloody battlefield behind.

His target was obvious. Lord Eric's head.

Meanwhile, eight kilometres east of Dairan and at around midnight, a commotion also broke out all at once at the mountain pass where the allied Garberan and western forces were confronting Allion's army. The reason was the same as for Eric's troops: brilliant flames had risen from the direction of Dairan.

Hearing the uproar, Zenon Owell almost came tumbling out his pavilion and, for a moment, he also stared in shock in that direction.

Lord Eric had not notified Prince Zenon of his intention to lead a raid that night. This had been to prevent information from leaking as much as possible, but now that they were caught in an enemy trap, nothing could have been more harmful than that decision.

"Rouse the soldiers! Ready weapons!"

Waking up from his momentary trance, Zenon started yelling so hard that his mouth seemed to take up his entire face. With the help of the squires who accompanied him as knight apprentices, the prince donned his armour.

Just as Zenon had predicted, cries of "Enemy attack, enemy attack!" soon rose as Phard Chryseum drove his warhorses from the east. The assault on Dairan had clearly been his signal. He moved with all the ferocity of a raging bull, with such terrifying force that it was hard to believe he had patiently been sitting still up until now. He rushed madly ahead, looking as though he would smash through anything that stood in his way, be it man, horse, or boulder.

Zenon was forced to make a decision. If they remained idly to one side, Dairan would be caught in a two-pronged attack between the forces currently assaulting it and the troops led by Phard. If the city fell, it would, of course, spell defeat for the allied forces.

"Prince Zenon!"

Gunshots, shouts of encouragement, and simple screams reverberated throughout the mountain pass, so that it was already impossible to hear what the person next to you was saying. Yet among it all, yelling in particularly loud voices, spurring on their huge horses, were the two commanders, Moldorf and Nilgif.

"Leave the rear to us."

Both displayed their teeth as they laughed, spears in hand. Zenon Owell nodded

immediately. The brothers' smiles broadened.

"Pull back, pull back!" Zenon cried. He swiftly reorganised the first unit, centred around the riflemen. "First unit, take up position at entrance of the pass. Cover the retreat of the following troops."

He called together each of the platoon commanders that he could see, and ordered them to stay in position until the first unit had completed its escape.

"Afterwards, each captain is to withdraw according to their own judgement. The western heroes are serving as the rear guard. Knights of Garbera, you have to repay their brave actions at all cost!"

The clouds of dust kicked up by the battle were already wafting towards Zenon's face.

On the opposing Allion side, General Phard Chryseum was part of the vanguard at the centre of those dust clouds. The many and heavy-looking iron balls hanging from his battle staff hummed as he whirled it around. Usually, when that kind of weapon was used from horseback, the grip was shortened to make it easier to use with one hand; but Phard merrily swung what an ordinary man would be hard-pressed to use even two-handed. Around him, the heads of western soldiers were blown away.

In battle, he raged like a storm. As Phard ferociously pressed closer, painting a whirlpool of blood above his head, even the western warriors, renowned for their bravery, and the Garberan soldiers, imbued in the spirit of chivalry, flinched and prepared to flee.

"Boring, Boooring," Phard laughed, and his breathing wasn't even uneven.

The woman's profile on the underside of his cloak flapped in and out of sight. Was there even a single enemy that survived after having seen it?

"So Garberan knights only amount to this much? You're not worthy of holding a spear. Hurry on back to town to write poetry for the ladies."

"Huh?" Phard's narrow eyes, smouldering from the feast of blood and slaughter, opened wide.

An enemy was hurtling his horses right at him. The rider's figure cut straight through the dust raised by Allion's army, and with each sweep of his spears, he mowed down

several of Allion's iron-clad cavalry that were galloping in front of Phard.

"Oooh!" he roared in admiration at the enemy's strength, seeing someone approach right before him without slowing their movements in the slightest.

Phard swept his war staff diagonally upwards. At that same moment, his opponent's spear cleaved through the air. Spear repelled staff then jabbed a further two, three times to knock back the iron balls that were about to smash directly into the opponent's face.

Both horses stopped abruptly, their forelegs suspended in the air. For just a second, Phard and the western cavalryman's faces came close to one another.

"Tell me your name."

"Moldorf, Kadyne's commander of the Tauran army."

"Got iiit!" Phard howled and kicked at his horse's flank.

He was not trying to escape, but to put some distance between them since he had realised that his own weapon was not suitable for close combat.

Aware of what he was trying to do, Moldorf was of course in hot pursuit. He thrust his spear forward repeatedly. Phard, however, shortened his grip on his staff and the iron balls repelled the spear.

Allion's army, meanwhile, continued to advance forward, but met with resistance from Nilgif's elite cavalrymen. They rode freely through the narrow mountain pass, sometimes charging, sometimes scattering left and right, fighting hard and constantly impeding the larger army's progress.

Nevertheless, the allied Garbera-western forces were compelled to retreat, whereas Allion's troops simply needed to continuously attack and advance. Inevitably, there was a difference in their energy and momentum.

The clouds of dust sent flying under the feet of the horses and infantrymen gradually moved west, and the position in which the allied forces had established their camp was violently trampled underfoot by Allion's army, along with all the flags from the various countries.

At the same time, in Dairan, the city's soldiers were concentrating their gunfire on Kaseria's forces which were drawing up to the front of the fortified mansion.

Although Kaseria was currently sheltered behind a building, waiting for the onslaught to subside, he had the curious impression that – *bullets can't even graze me when I'm winning*. Perhaps holding those kinds of beliefs was a type of strength in this kind of mêlée combat.

While Kaseria was giving his riflemen orders to counterattack, the cannon was successfully set up. Before long, the gun barrel roared and belched out vast quantities of black smoke.

“Guah!”

Dairan soldiers were blown away by the explosion, and the gate to the mansion collapsed.

Kaseria allowed his men to rest for a moment, then gave the order of assault. Naturally, he was running in the vanguard. His horse soared over the rubble that had once been the gate then, for a second, Kaseria tilted his head to the right.

From the other side of the whirling dust, a spear came hurtling, humming through the air. Aiming for the instant when the spear was fully extended towards him, Kaseria stretched out his hand and calmly took hold of it.

The first prince of Allion did not often get to play like this. On the battlefield, where even the tiniest miscalculation could prove fatal, he deliberately placed himself in unnecessary danger to confirm for himself just how much he transcended and overwhelmed his surroundings.

In the case of this spear, if he had not waited for the very instant when it had lost its momentum, his wrist would have been blown flying into the air. He succeeded magnificently, however, smoothly grabbing the spear then swiftly turning its tip around to thrust it through the chest of an enemy on the ground.

The soldier died without uttering a sound, and Kaseria's horse tramped over the corpse. It was then that, sensing someone's gaze on him, Kaseria once again turned his neck.

The place was something like the mansion's front garden. Ever since the era of the Ancient Magic Dynasty, this land was known to have a unique sense of aesthetics; so even though Kaseria was royalty from Allion, which had originated from that same dynasty, the arrangement of the rocks inserted into the landscape of the Ende-style garden looked strange to him.

A small figure stood amidst the light tendrils of smoke that were still drifting about.

Thil.

She had been running indoors searching for her little sister, when it occurred to her that Reen might have gone rushing out of the mansion, and so she had gone to look in the front garden. It was at that moment that gate had been bombarded.

She was almost blown away by the blast, but she somehow managed to not be swept away by crouching down and clinging to a rock. It was as she was standing, coughing violently, that her and Kaseria's eyes met.

Kaseria Jamil's lips curved into a smile that could only be called gentle.

He was a man who certainly did not dislike children, perhaps because, at heart, he had a childlike personality. Whenever there was an event at which his youngest relatives gathered, he even took the initiative to organise games like hide-and-seek in the palace.

The little girl who appeared within the clearing smoke looked clever but also, as youthful as she was, her appearance held a promise of one day being able to excite a man's instincts.

Oh, she'll grow up to be a beauty – thought Kaseria. Even as he thought so, he pulled the spear out of the Dairan soldier that he had stabbed just a moment ago. The sensation of flesh and gore felt good to the hand.

No, she would have grown up to be a beauty. If she hadn't met me.

It's too bad.

But it can't be helped. Since, unfortunately for her, she met me.

He was curious.

He wanted to see how red this little child's blood would be.

She had been fated, in the future, to be loved and raised like a princess, but he would be tearing that fate down –

On the battlefield, the shackles that held back desires of every kind fell loose. Thoughts that flashed through his mind as nothing more than mere curiosity instantly connected to instinctive desires that could not be suppressed.

Kaseria Jamil feared that part of himself. At the same time, whenever he stood on the battlefield, he felt a joy that could not be compared to that moment of fear.

Kaseria brandished the spear.

Thil could only stare at the sight in shock. Her thoughts were frozen, and she could neither run nor scream. Her trembling lips emitted a sound that was not quite a voice. She could not form her sister's name, or call for her mother and father.

In the next second, the spear thrown by the first prince of Allion drew an arc in the air.

PART 2

At the whistling sound it made as it cut through the wind, Thil came back to her senses. Her bare feet struck the ground, but since her muscles had not kept up with her sudden awakening, she toppled backwards.

Which was actually fortunate for her. The spear lost its target and pierced the ground right in front of her. Thil gazed at the fiercely quivering spear handle as though it was something out of a nightmare.

“Gah,” Allion’s prince growled, spittle flying from his lips. “Gah!”

He was annoyed at having missed. It felt as though the self-confidence and pride from having earlier taken the enemy’s spear as he pleased had been almost entirely used up. At the same time, however, there was a certain pleasure to be had in putting off enjoyment.

Kaseria spurred his horse forward. The beautiful sound that his sword made as it slid out of its scabbard was especially pleasing to the prince’s ear.

Thil tried to stand up, but she couldn’t put any strength into her legs and hips. She stared wide-eyed as ‘death’ spread its black wings before her. Unable to protest against this irrational violence, her fate, or even against the person who was visiting them upon her, Thil could only fix her gaze on its approach.

Kaseria chuckled unintentionally.

Don’t worry.

I’m not clumsy, so you won’t suffer. I’ll take your head in one strike.

He raised his sword above his shoulder. As though its tip had reached the night sky, the dark clouds parted at that moment, and the moonlight shone down.

Thil unconsciously closed her eyes.

What should have come next was an arc of pale, reflected light drawing towards her neck. At that moment, a wave of screams crashed against Kaseria from behind.

To Thil, they sounded like the very embodiment of the land's – of Dairan's – fury at being trampled over. For a moment, it was as though the myriad spirits who resided in every last grain of sand, and who had protected Ende for so long, had flung aside the spell that had momentarily bound them and exploded from the earth to the sky.

Kaseria sharply halted his horse as his subordinate came galloping up.

"Your Highness!"

"What?" he asked. His expression was just as annoyed as if he had been interrupted while dallying with a woman.

"E-Enemies."

At the soldier's words however, he drew his fine eyebrows together.

"What enemies? Enemies from where? Did Ende still have troops hidden somewhere?"

"N-No," the soldier vehemently shook his head. "It's Mephius. Mephius' army has appeared south of Dairan and is attacking us!"

In fact, at that moment, Dairan's south gate burst open and the one thousand soldiers led by Gil Mephius plunged into its streets.

"Squadrons, spread out," Orba shouted from horseback, acting the part of Crown Prince Gil. On top of his leather armour, he was wearing metal covering on his chest, arms and on part of his legs. "Drive Allion's troops out of Dairan!"

Raising his voice so that it could be heard over the clatter of the horses' hooves, Orba also swiftly grasped his spear and jabbed it through the neck of an Allion soldier who was staring up at him in blank shock.

This would be Mephius' first military exploit during this war.

A few hours earlier –

Orba had been approaching Dairan by the air route. The plan had been to spend the night at the relay base, but he could not hide his irritation – *Time is precious*.

Even though Dairan was just a stone's throw away, they still knew nothing of what Lord Eric was doing. Even the soldiers at the fort did not seem to have received any detailed information. And more than anything, it was unnatural that not a single messenger had come from Eric to greet the foreign reinforcements who had come from afar.

Orba had a strong sense that something was wrong. Nor was he a man who could peacefully fall asleep when there was something that worried him or he wasn't satisfied with.

Still, they could not set out at night with the ships, and there was no concrete reason to have the horses gallop through the dark. Orba had just about resigned himself to waiting until dawn, his irritation like a sharp pain within him.

"What are you going to do about the dragons?"

Hou Ran called out to him out of nowhere.

"What do you mean?"

"Are you going to have the Houbans go overland in pulley-cages? For the small and medium-sized ones, I can ride a horse alongside them and look out for trouble."

For a moment, Orba didn't know what the girl with dark brown skin was talking about. The dragons, whose cages were still in the hold, were simply supposed to be carried to Dairan by ship the next day. The two of them faced each other in silence for a while.

The men from Ende, who were watching from a distance, stared at the unusual sight of a woman from the west. While glancing inadvertently at them, Orba had a sudden realisation. Is she saying to hurry? He turned back towards the young dragon handler.

"Is there something going on in Dairan?"

"Something? Hmm, I don't know if anything's going on. I just thought that you wanted to go, Orba."

In a way, her answer was a complete let-down but, separate from the embarrassment of being seen through and the disappointment that Ran had not received any supernatural premonition, one thought reoccurred to him.

No, there is something. There must be.

Even after arriving here, they did not know what Lord Eric was doing, which made it very likely that he had already started covert manoeuvres.

“Right, since you say so, Ran, we’ll go.”

“I don’t say anything.”

“Yes, you did. It’s fine, so choose the dragons to be moved.”

His mind made up, regardless of what anyone had to say, Orba immediately summoned Pashir and the other commanding officers to inform them of their departure. There was a mad rush to get ready to depart within half an hour. Soldiers who had only just untied their armour had to scramble to obey the prince’s whim.

When Dairan finally came into sight, the sky above its high ramparts glowed a brilliant red.

It’s burning – Orba momentarily halted his army corps, which had been thrown into uproar, and quickly had the men form into squadrons.

“We’ll be fighting immediately. Have your weapons ready and put some back into it!”

Just a while earlier, the soldiers had been grumbling about this forced march at night, but at that sharp cry, tired faces instantly gave way to clear eyes.

Since they obviously could not use the dragons inside the city, three hundred soldiers were left in the rear with them. The command of these was given to the former gladiator, Miguel Tes.

At around that same time, distress beacons were belatedly lit on Dairan’s south side and riders on swift horses were sent out to call for reinforcements. They ran into Orba, who asked that they turn back and get the gates opened. The messengers obeyed, almost weeping with emotion at finding these unexpected reinforcements.

Thus, with Prince Gil in the lead, a thousand soldiers charged shouting through the gate.

Allion’s soldiers, who had been deployed throughout the city and who were busy

wrecking it, were utterly taken aback by the sudden assault. Until just the moment before, they had been riding a wave of one-sided slaughter, swords and spears finding their prey one after another, then trampling them beneath their horses' hooves.

Leaving a platoon with Pashir and Kain, who was wearing the iron mask and pretending to be 'Orba', the real Orba took a few soldiers and hurried to the Plutos mansion, guided by the messenger from earlier. He had only gone there because he needed to meet the head of the house, Kayness, but this led him to an unexpected encounter.

Kaseria Jamil.

The first prince of Allion was silently and ferociously cursing while turning his horse around.

Gil Mephius.

Orba, the former gladiator who had falsely take that name, had his sword raised from where he had just beheaded an Allion soldier who was near the cannon.

Who would first become aware of the other?

Once Kaseria realised that the enemy was already drawing near, he spurred his horse into a gallop faster than it took him to think about it. His plan was to force his way right through the enemy's centre. If he struck swiftly, it would be a faster and easier way of escaping than hiding and stealthily sneaking away.

He grabbed his spear and hurled it at an enemy who had just noticed his approach.

Orba struck it down with his bloodied sword.

Startled by the sudden impact, his horse, however, reared upwards, its two forelegs in the air. Just as though he had been expecting that reaction, Kaseria quickly had his own horse lunge in to fill the empty space that it left. He swept forward as though he had turned into the wind itself.

Maintaining the momentum from striking down the spear, Orba's sword slashed sideways. His horse's posture was still uneven. Yet from that unexpected angle, he

drove a blow into Prince Kaseria's helmet.

"Guah!"

For a second, Kaseria was almost thrown from the horse's back. It felt as though dark blood was dripping from the upper edge of his vision, and that darkness was engulfing both the vivid flames and the rows of Dairan's houses. He hurriedly shook his head and sent his dizziness flying along with the half-smashed steel helmet.

Once he had come back to himself, he bellowed a war cry and once again turned his horse around. Orba had not expected this defeated enemy would come charging at him again.

Obedying his instincts, Kaseria swiftly drew the sword at his waist, galloped in the straight line that was the shortest way to close the distance with his enemy, and thrust fiercely.

Orba intercepted it from horseback.

Once... Twice...

Strong.

The same word flitted through both their minds.

On the third strike, however, Orba's entire frame staggered.

Kaseria's fourth jab came at unbelievable speed.

Now that battle had begun, he had simply abandoned his consciousness to the primeval desire for ever more blood and flesh. Honed through innumerable battles and backed by the experience from them, that instinct had grown sharper and surer; and now the ferocity of his attacks could knock back any enemy and leave them grovelling at his feet. Therefore, just as though he had the gift of prophecy, Kaseria could see everything he needed to know about this foolish enemy who stood directly before him a second before he needed it.

He could see the scene in which a straight line would cut right through his enemy's neck, followed by an eruption of blood and him falling from his horse.

Kaseria's lips curved into a crescent-shape and parted slightly.

Orba also looked towards him at that moment.

The stars were sparsely scattered across the sky. Against that backdrop, the enemy sword swung over his head.

The wind only rose afterwards.

There was the smell of steel.

Orba, his posture still unsteady, avoided his opponent's blow by practically sprawling flat across his horse's back.

"Bastard!" the blood thundered around in Kaseria's head. He was so angry at having his foresight be off the mark here, on the battlefield, that he did not even feel hatred.

It was at that moment, however, that the soldiers accompanying Gil leapt forward to restrain him from either side with their spears. If he stayed where he was, he would be entirely surrounded. Kaseria ground his teeth.

"Remember this well, you bastard," he shouted, as he pulled his horse's reins up to his chest. "You should feel honoured to know that I've deigned to remember your face. But it won't be for long. I immediately forget the faces of those whose heads' I cut off!"

Orba finally managed to right his riding posture while Kaseria was yelling his provocations and hurrying his horse away. One of the soldiers rode towards him to try and block his path, but in the next second, the head above his neck vanished and spurts of blood gushed up.

He's like a bolt of lightning – Orba thought as he gasped for breath. That man's speed while attacking from horseback and at switching positions was comparable to Moldorf or Pashir. If he had not had experience against those skilled veterans, Orba would have quickly succumbed against that strength and would probably have been a cooling corpse by now.

"You alright?" he called out to the little girl who had collapsed with a thud in the front garden – Thil.

The girl looked up at the foreign young warrior with a dumbfounded expression, but

after a moment, she started nodding her head repeatedly. It would probably take a while before she could speak again.

“Ah, would you be the Lord Crown Prince of Mephius?” Kayness Plutos appeared at that point, surrounded by a group armed with spears. It looked like the messenger had been quick to inform him.

Orba realised that the one talking to him must be the current lord of Dairan. He had a spear in hand and was wearing armour, and had probably been resolved to fight the enemy to the death if they had penetrated into the mansion; but his expression showed relief that – *We’re saved*.

Orba dismounted and answered Kayness’ bow. These were times of war and there was no time for long, elaborate greetings.

“Where is Lord Eric currently?” he asked.

With a bitter expression, Kayness explained the situation. They had been suppose to perform a night attack based on information extracted from spies sent by Allion, but instead, it was Dairan which was attacked and he feared that Lord Eric was isolated and surrounded by enemies. Judging from the fact that a messenger had arrived to request reinforcements, however, the worst had probably not happened.

The sounds of battle were gradually dying down within Dairan.

At about that time, the remnants of Kayness’ troop of reinforcements were also returning. They had gone for a surprise attack on Kaseria, but had ended up taking severe damage, and Thil’s father, Darowkin, barely escaped with his life. Although his shoulder and foot had been pierced with bullets, he apologised in tears to his own father, Kayness, for his lack of foresight.

“The enemy ran rings around us. I was the one who gave orders to send reinforcements. You are not responsible,” Kayness consoled his son, looking as pained as though he too had been seriously wounded.

Thil clung to her father, weeping, then later, when the ladies’ maids who had been looking for her found Reen, the two sisters rejoiced together that each was safe.

Meanwhile, Orba gathered the troops that had been deployed throughout Dairan. Pashir, whose armour was patchily coloured in blood, came hurrying.

“We can leave any time,” he announced. Shortly after, Kain returned, leading the platoon.

Reports indicated that they had taken very few losses. A messenger was sent to the three hundred soldiers who had been left at the rear with instructions for them to assume defensive positions around Dairan. This was to prepare for the unlikely event of another emergency, but airships sent to fly around the surroundings found no evidence of any further ambush.

“Good...” Orba was about to set off once more to bring reinforcements to Lord Eric.

It was just about then that a gunshot resounded.

PART 3

At around that time, a lone Allian soldier had been hiding in the corner of a shed. Up until a moment ago, his breathing had been ragged, but now it was closer to wheezing. He had been shot through the abdomen and the bleeding wouldn't stop.

He had somehow managed to take refuge here, but he could sense what his fate would be. He could no longer be saved. Even the words of the prayers that he was inwardly reciting to the spirits were losing their meaning, each individual sound scattering as his consciousness was almost swallowed up by a sea of white.

He was only in his twenties. Just before leaving for war, he had exchanged a promise to get married with his sweetheart. One after another, he thought back to the faces of the girl who would have become his wife, of his parents, and of his kid brother. His strong sense of shame and his attachment to life were already fading, and a strange sense of appeasement, like being wrapped up in a warm blanket on a winter's night, was slowly permeating his body.

He should have peacefully breathed his last.

Get up.

The whisper only barely reached him.

Get up. You have an important task to accomplish with your dying breath.

It sounded like his father scolding him, like his mother gently advising him. Even by mustering all of his strength, he had barely been able to force his eyes open more than a crack, yet now, as if by miracle, they opened wide.

Guided by some inexplicable impulse, he rose unsteadily to his feet. There was a window nearby. The world seemed to have been painted black but he could see a group of flaming points of light.

At their centre was a young man who was about to mount his horse. Or no, perhaps he was still at an age where he could be called a boy.

That's Gil Mephius.

A whisper.

Crown prince of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius. Do you know? It's because he led reinforcements here that Prince Kaseria was forced to withdraw and that you are here, dying from your wounds.

The young man seemed about to say something, but all that escaped from his faintly parted lips were weak gasps. It felt as though the bleeding from his stomach had stopped. That was not, of course, because he was cured, but simply because every last drop of blood seemed to have already spilled out from his body.

Do it.

Someone whispered. In his father's voice.

You have to do it.

His mother's voice.

If you don't, that man will eventually destroy Allion.

His little brother's voice. And following it –

The places you've known since childhood will vanish in flames, the home you yearn to return to will be trampled by dragons. The severed heads of your father and mother will be displayed at the tips of spears, the woman you love will be made a slave in Mephius...

The young man took the gun that had been at his side the whole time. With trembling hands, he placed the barrel on the window sash. Straining his eyes to the utmost, he could just make out Gil Mephius' form, no larger than a child's finger. At that distance, he didn't know if he would be able to hit him.

Do it.

Even so, someone's voice – the voices of the young man's loved ones spoke in unison.

Do it for Allion. Before your life burns out, do what only you can do.

His vision was dark and blurry. From time to time, Prince Gil's form, or rather, the entire visible world, seemed to flicker like a flame in the wind. Even the sensation of

his finger on the trigger felt far away.

Now...

He felt arms hugging him from behind. Mischievous fingers crawled over his neck and chest, just like his fiancée's. When he glanced sideways, it was unmistakably her smile that he could see. Her lips were slightly protruding, and he knew that his friends were divided in their evaluation of them. But as for the young man himself, it was almost painful how much he loved them.

Those lips parted. Her breath, as hot as flames, as sweetly-scented as flowers, brushed softly against his face.

Do it!

The young man pulled the trigger.

Was he able to see for himself if his aim had hit? No, had he even been able to hear the gunshot in the first place?

The young man slumped against the window frame and no longer moved a single muscle. Naturally, there was no one else in the shed.

Yet the voice which had been whispering to the young man the whole time left behind an enigmatic murmur.

Eleven.

A second after the gunshot rang out, blood spurted right in front of Gil Mephius, who had his foot in the stirrup and who had been about to swing himself up.

Not far from the prince, a soldier was crouching, cradling his arm.

A shooting – or so it seemed, and the entire surroundings erupted into instant uproar.

“Enemies!”

The nearby Pashir quickly placed his horse in the direction that the bullet had come

from and put himself in position to act as the prince's shield.

It was not only the Mephian soldiers, but also the ones from Ende, who had been gathering there, who were thrown into confusion, and the place became a jumble of those who threw themselves to the ground with a cry, those who ran off to look for the sniper, and those who positioned themselves to shield the prince.

The soldier who had taken the shot was not fatally injured. Perhaps because of the distance, the bullet had only penetrated as far as the muscles of his arm, from which darkish blood was flowing.

"Prince, please withdraw," said Pashir, urging Gil to get into the saddle.

Twelve.

When he heard that enigmatic whisper, Orba sensed a fierce presence coming from behind him. He turned around.

The piles of gravel left after the bombardment were as tall as a child's height. Another gravely wounded Allion soldier was lying hidden among them. He was a middle-aged man, and while he had been hovering between life and death, he had heard the same kind of voice as the young soldier hiding in the shed, and now held the same determination. That, of course, was something that Orba had no way of knowing.

The man aimed his longsword at Orba.

The sword was not one issued by the army. He had been raised in poverty, but when he been incorporated into Kaseria's unit, his wife had used up their meagre savings to buy a good blade. "To protect you," she had said.

Mustering his remaining strength, he put his all into that one blow.

Orba swung around, simultaneously drawing his sword, and intercepted the strike with the blade he was unsheathing.

He was able to kill the momentum, but despite the sudden hit, he could not alter the longsword's trajectory. His chest received the same impact as it would from a blow struck with all of an adult man's strength. Atop his horse, Orba staggered, but with his next swing, he unerringly took the enemy soldier's head.

“Prince!”

By the time Pashir had noticed the struggle going on behind him and turned around, Orba, unable to recover his balance, was falling from the horse. Pashir leapt down from his own mount to try to catch and support Gil Mephius, but he did not make it in time before the prince was flung to the ground.

“Your Highness.”

“Your Highness Gil!”

The other Imperial Guards had also realised what was happening and rushed over. Pashir ordered them to form a circle around the prince. After this succession of surprise attacks, the soldiers’ faces were, unsurprisingly, tense.

Gil Mephius lay face down on the ground, his shoulders heaving. Pashir grasped hold of his shoulders as though to restrain their movements and turned the prince face upwards, propping him against one of his knees.

Part of his breastplate was badly dented. It was where he had been hit with the sword, however, when Pashir saw it, the grim look vanished from his face. The other Imperial Guards, Kain – wearing the iron mask – included, were all peering over from their nearby positions and also heaved sighs of relief. The armour had stopped the blow. At the very least, there should be no serious injury.

Pashir’s expression, however, changed once more. Orba was sweating profusely and was breathing raggedly through his mouth. Although the sword hadn’t pierced him, perhaps he had bones broken from the impact, or maybe he had hit his head badly when he had fallen from the horse.

“His Highness has been injured,” Pashir cried, reaching a snap conclusion. “Someone, take His Highness to safety and...”

A hand gripped Pashir’s arm. Orba’s. As Pashir stopped talking, he heard Orba’s voice asking, “Who are you?”

He was surrounded by soldiers who were carrying flame torches. As Orba’s eyelids flickered incessantly, the light from the flames was intermittently reflected in his eyes.

His gaze, however, was directed at no one.

“Who are you?” he shouted again.

In the few moments between being caught by a surprise attack and hitting the ground after falling from horseback, Orba had a strange experience. The instant that he was thrown into the air, he had the sensation that someone had caught him by the arm.

At first, Orba thought that Pashir was supporting him to prevent him from falling off his horse. When he looked up, however, the arm that had caught his was pale and lifeless. He did not know whose it was.

Black ripples were running through a point in mid-air, and a single arm was stretching out from it. With terrifying strength, it was pulling Orba upwards. Opposing that strength was the force of gravity, which was pulling Orba downwards, and the agonising pain made it feel as though his body was being torn in two.

That he even had time to scream was because he was, in fact, being separated in two.

One of him bounced against the ground with a thud, while the other him was drawn upwards towards the black ripples. Orba was helpless to resist as his arms and shoulders, head and chest were swallowed in.

Before he even realised it, he was drifting in a black space.

“Welcome to my castle,” a voice seemed to rain relentlessly down on him from all directions. Orba thought he must be having a nightmare. That he had been badly injured, and that between the confusion and the dizziness, he was having a strange dream.

“This is no dream, Crown Prince of Mephius,” as though it had read his thoughts, the voice laughed scornfully at him. “This space was built in exchange for twelve lives. Or saying it otherwise, it is a castle constructed from the resentment, and from the blood and rotting flesh of twelve people. This place neither exists nor does it not exist. Just as I am not present, but neither am I gone. I prepared it as a suitable place in which to meet you.”

“Who are you?” Orba screamed. Within this entirely black space, he could barely feel even his own body, and only voices reverberated clearly. “You, who are you? What are you...”

“There is no point in introducing myself to you.”

A pale point of light lit up in front of Orba. For a second, it seemed about to emit a dazzling light, then it scattered, and something that looked like a starry night sky emerged.

No sooner had it done so than the light from the stars startled to wriggle, as though each had a will of its own, some tracing straight lines, others drawing curves, creating complicated and mysterious patterns. Finally, the patterns all came together as one, forming the image of a human face. The face of an elderly man with an imposing beard.

“However, as your pitiful life is drawing to a close, I will do you the favour of giving you my name. I am Zafar. Mine is an insignificant body, fated to obey the rules of sorcery, themselves born hundreds of years ago, and no more than a single fragment of the diagram of Fate that I would risk my life to form. Nor do I believe that my name has much worth.”

He paused, then his luminous mouth opened wide, revealing the pitch-black expanse stretching behind it as he laughed.

“Ending your life is easy to do in a place like this. Which is why I staged an ‘attack’. But even though you are, in the end, little more than a doll bound to obey the diagram of Fate, there is reason to fear that you might suddenly upset Lord Garda’s plans. Your ‘fate’ should already have run its course, so why have you been getting so much in the way? How can the dead alter the diagram of Fate? Now then, reveal all to me. Are you one of Barbaroi’s flunkies or the emissary of some other power? I will carefully uncover the truth.”

“Uwah!”

When he heard the sound of gigantic footsteps approaching from behind, Miguel Tes, who was leading the unit, pulled his horse to one side in astonishment. No sooner had he done so than a large-sized dragon – a Houban – passed by him, making the ground tremble as it went. It was so close that he could even see how the flesh on its flat flanks was twitching and undulating.

It was pulling a cage containing other dragons. Riding a horse at the Houban’s side and guiding it was the dragon tamer, Hou Ran.

“You cretin, I almost got killed!” Miguel cursed.

The crown prince had left him in charge of three hundred soldiers and the dragons. Since the dragons could not be used to fight inside the city, they had been ordered to wait on standby outside the walls as back-up troops, but just a few moments ago, a messenger had come from Dairan with new instructions to defend the city. Arrangements were currently being made for the beasts to be transported to Dairan’s dragon pens.

Miguel clicked his tongue in open dissatisfaction.

“Even though we’re finally at war, I’ve missed the chance to collect achievements again,” and on top of that, he had been appointed to babysit dragons. Right now, the ambitious young man found even Hou Ran, who was leading the dragons, to be loathsome. Because of that, his attitude was acrimonious.

“Oi, even if you hurry, nothing good’s going to come out of it, you know. It’s totally too late for any chance at glory,” he tossed out, but Hou Ran had her horse pick up more and more speed, urging on the Houban.

Miguel did not know it, but Ran could perceive an unpleasant ‘stench’ coming from the direction ahead. Which was why she was hurrying onwards. However –

“...?”

Just as suddenly as she had urged it to go faster, she abruptly had her horse slow down. The Houban also gradually lost speed until its huge body came to a stop.

Miguel’s horse soon caught up.

“Well aren’t you being awfully obedient?”

Hou Ran did not move. In itself, that was still something within the realm of Miguel’s comprehension, but the atmosphere surrounding the dragons had suddenly changed.

They were making absolutely no noise.

Instead, they were huddling together on one side of the cage, as though something had frightened them. Ran had stopped to find out the reason for their strange behaviour.

“Oi, do your job more...” Miguel started to raise his voice.

Just then, there was another change.

The strange phenomenon had not come to an end, but it was, so to speak, as though the ‘direction that the phenomenon’s wind was blowing’ had changed.

There was a terrific thump. Miguel unintentionally cried out at the sudden, loud noise, and his horse reared upwards.

“What!”

He thought for a moment that there was an enemy attack, but when he checked, it was the nearby cage which was shaking ferociously. But not because of some outside force. The large beasts with their sharp fangs and claws had all at once started rampaging inside of it.

Before Miguel’s eyes, the bars of the cage bent. Through the slightly widened gap, the paw of a medium-sized dragon – a Goll – suddenly stretched outwards.

“O-oi!” Miguel shouted and hurriedly pulled on Ran’s shoulder. The gleaming claws had been about to maul her as the paw stretched out.

Ran slid down from her horse when Miguel pulled her, although thanks to her splendid reflexes, she managed to land on her feet.

Yet she looked utterly stunned. Hou Ran stared at the raging dragons with the same expression she would have had if she had seen the sun rise at midnight.

CHAPTER 4

THE ROYAL PRINCESS AND THE IMPERIAL PRINCESS

PART 1

Around the time when Imperial Crown Prince Gil of Mephius managed to enter Ende, the disturbance which had divided Solon in two showed signs of growing even more heated than before.

It had all started with a tea party sponsored by the imperial princess, Ineli.

An armed group had suddenly burst in on it and had forcibly attempted to carry her off. It was said that they had acted on Empress Melissa's orders. Now that her daughter had become the face of the crown prince's faction, she could not afford to leave her be. Having barely managed to avoid being taken, Ineli flew into a rage. She too prepared to use armed force to counter-attack Melissa, her own mother.

Guessing what her actions would be, Melissa had swiftly taken soldiers with her and had barricaded herself inside the Dragon Gods' temple along with her daughter Flora and a portion of the nobles who were recognised as belonging to the emperor's faction. The situation was further complicated by the fact that Emperor Guhl Mephius had accompanied Melissa's entourage to the temple.

The official story was that "His Majesty's health is not favourable so he is visiting the elders at the temple in order to receive prayers and divine protection," however, while it would have been usual for him to travel to the shrine with a considerable retinue, not a single person had seen the emperor's procession. It seemed likely that Melissa and those connected to her had probably used rough methods to bring the emperor out of the palace.

The news had gotten tangled, and there were some false reports that it was the crown prince's faction which had first used armed force. They had conquered the palace and forced the emperor into submission. The empress had opposed them and, in place of the emperor who had collapsed due to illness, she had gathered the loyal retainers

and was bravely resisting from within the temple.

While the emperor's and the crown prince's factions faced off against one another, the emperor himself had not been seen or heard from once since entering the temple, while Crown Prince Gil was currently taking reinforcements to Ende.

As a result, the vague anxiety that everybody had been feeling soon boiled over and erupted in the form of violence. Starting with Solon, uprisings and disturbances broke out one after another throughout Mephius. In both the emperor's and the crown prince's faction, there were many who felt that – *this is my chance to make a name for myself* – and led their soldiers to take control of forts and villages, as well as those who moved their troops to stop them, reasoning that – *suppressing them will earn me recognition*.

The emperor's rule had been despotic, and there were a great many who were dissatisfied, such as those who did not have the emperor's favour or those who felt that they had been pushed into an unfair position. Moreover, there was no shortage of younger sons of aristocratic and military houses who would not inherit as heads of their family, but who had distinguished themselves during the ten-year war with Garbera, yet Mephius was not a land suited to being divided amongst scores of people. Like a torrent breaking over the river bank, one after another they rose to action.

With the government having fallen into chaos, the influence of local authorities naturally came to the forefront. Thefts and assaults proliferated in the towns, and the number of bandits attacking along the highways multiplied. After the uprising in Kilro, the slaves' excitement had started to cool down, but now flared back up again in the form of escapes and insurrections.

Of course, the capital did not just silently watch over all of this. General Odyne Lorgo, whom Gil had, so to speak, left in charge of the capital, dispatched troops to every area to suppress the disturbances.

Since the merchants of the port city of Birac had a strong sense of self-governance, that town was not caught up in the unrest, and the domain lord, Fedom, could instead take the initiative of mobilising Rogue Saian's troops to assist Odyne.

Thus, it was largely the crown prince's faction which was able to display leadership and the ability to take action.

The situation showed how much the emperor's influence had declined, but those who

were close to him were not about to let go of their vested interests, and formed a secret alliance. According to the rumours that drifted into the capital, they had been assembling troops centred around the governors of fortresses ever since the crown prince had left Mephian territory. They stirred up fervour by claiming that “the schemes of the crown prince’s faction are preventing His Majesty and the empress from moving. We will storm the capital and rescue them.”

Odyne, Folker, and the others had, of course, taken all measures to surround the Dragon Gods’ temple. Their encircling net allowed no one to pass inside nor to escape outwards; but since Emperor Guhl Mephius himself was within, they could not make use of violent means. Yet as long as ‘His Gracious Majesty’ remained safe, the emperor’s faction was not going to reign in its actions.

Ineli Mephius irritably took stock of this situation, in which Solon continued to be locked in a strange stalemate while sparks flew all around it. The angle of her eyebrows grew sharper by the day, as did the number of times she found fault with her ladies’ maids, the soldiers, and everyone around her.

Before long, she started suggesting that they should force their way into the temple.

“We should send soldiers in immediately. Even the ‘enemy’ couldn’t possibly use His Majesty as a shield. Isn’t this simply underestimating our ability to push forward?”

So saying, she repeatedly urged Odyne to use military force, but:

“If we use strong measures at this point, it might provide those inside and outside of the city with a just cause to turn their weapons against us. We would do better to await our chance,” he chided her each time.

Those who were causing disturbances all around were no different in thought than Ineli. *I need to seize this opportunity to make a name for myself* – all of them were bound with that almost obsessive thought.

And so it was that, in the end, Ineli used a portion of those who were likewise looking to curry favour with the imperial princess and, late one night, mobilised soldiers on nothing but her own judgement.

“We don’t need to destroy the temple. Once we’ve taught them a lesson, we’ll soon see how fragile the ‘enemy’s’ solidarity is. Defectors will start appearing one after another, and this ridiculous disturbance will come to an end.”

With those words, the cannons were placed into position and the temple was bombarded. As the roar of cannonfire resounded, regardless of it being from the emperor's or the crown prince's faction, it sounded like Mephius' death throes.

Fortunately, the aim was off and a unit under Odyne's banner realised what was happening and was able to stop the bombardment after the second shot, so the episode had no effect other than to galvanise the emperor's faction. The next day, a squad fired a volley of cannonballs at the capital's ramparts in retaliation before being broken up by Solon's guards as the townspeople huddled together and watched the thick, white smoke rising up.

It was while Solon was being shaken by chaos that a visitor arrived. A Garberan royal princess who had travelled by ship from Birac.

Needless to say, it was Vileena Owell.

The first to greet the princess was Theresia, who had formerly been her head lady's maid in Garbera.

Vileena had previously left Solon after making a declaration, unbecoming of a princess, that "I am going to take some soldiers to subjugate Salamand."

Theresia now bowed with a deliberately calm expression and asked, "Did you have a pleasant trip?"

The princess nodded with a smile.

"It was very pleasant. I unexpectedly got to see the skies of my hometown once more."

"That is indeed very fortunate. However, it is rare for you to overturn the plans you have decided on, Princess. Even I was surprised that you had gone to relax in Garbera," Theresia said with sarcastic admiration.

The old lady's maid was, of course, given the details. That Salamand's capture had gone well but thereupon, the princess had been shot at by someone and her life had suddenly been placed in danger; also that she had travelled to Phozon, the capital of their home country, but had remained inside the air carrier without setting a single foot beyond it.

But let us have no tedious repetitions. Looking at her mistress, whose hair concealed the tightly wound bandages, Theresia had the startling impression that she was looking at a wounded warrior who bore their injuries with pride rather than pain.

At the same time –

Oh? – Theresia frowned slightly. The princess' eyes were red. She must surely have been seized by homesickness after returning for a while to Garbera, thought Theresia, when...

“Fuwaaaah.”

“Princess...”

Vileena gave such a huge yawn that Theresia had no choice but to sharply reprove her.

“Have you not slept?”

“No, not for about three days.” Vileena rubbed her eyes.

Since Gowen had, of course, sent advance notice that the princess would be visiting Solon, Theresia was not the only one who had gone out to meet her, there had also been messengers from Ineli and the other nobles currently in the capital. Vileena merely exchanged formal greetings with them, however, and left afterwards with no one but Theresia, saying that “I’m going to my chambers.”

The chambers in question were the ones that had been allocated her when the crown prince had still been in Solon. Her manner indicated that she considered that nothing had changed from before and that this was her living space.

To their side, slaves going about their work at the port were about to pass by. They were carrying heavy loads on their backs. A man who looked like the port supervisor hurled abuse at them for being “slow”.

Vileena Owell cast them a vague sideward glance.

“Say, Theresia...”

“Hearing you say ‘say’ makes me feel uneasy.”

“What do you mean, ‘uneasy,’” for a second, Vileena puffed her cheeks, but her expression immediately went back to being serious. “My greatest source of pride is having been born into Garbera’s royal family.”

“I know.”

“However, if, for example, the townspeople here were to say, right in front of me, that that was nothing compared to their own pride and joy in being the sons or daughters of their own parents, I would not laugh at them.”

“Indeed.”

“Then what about slaves?” Vileena turned to look over her shoulder once again at the men moving every which way around the port. “Do they also feel proud of their origins and of their current selves?”

“...”

Theresia was about to answer something but instead remained silent. She understood that Vileena was not making a careless comment, and neither was she looking for Theresia to answer her.

“Lineage is a strange thing if you think about it. If you follow an unbroken line of births, you arrive at the same place for everyone. So what is it that makes me proud of being part of the royal family? Is it because I can see for myself the nobility of my grandfather, my father, and my brothers? Is it because of the examples, the honour, and also the nobility of my ancestors recorded in history books?”

Vileena turned to face forwards. The sky was faintly blue. Perhaps it was because of the disturbances that were breaking out all over, but messenger airships and air carriers were incessantly taking off and landing at the port.

“I am a royal princess of Garbera,” she quietly stated that obvious fact and continued walking. “I inherited that blood and carry that history. Both past and future. Right, my words aren’t mine alone, my body doesn’t belong only to me. If I go too far in prioritising my own wishes and values, and betray my lineage, I will be smearing mud over both the spirits of the past and the future of the royal family. Because....”

“...”

Because I am a royal princess of Garbera.

Vileena's steps did not falter. Quite the opposite: she sped up, leaving Theresia to look at her advancing back. That was no doubt to not let her see the liveliness that was shining brightly in her red and bloodshot eyes, but she had, literally, been a step too slow.

Because... my blood and soul have to match that same integrity.

PART 2

Princess Ineli Mephius' patience had once again exceeded its limits.

The chaos was continuing in Mephius. Gil was still on the way to Dairan, Folker had gone to put down a slave revolt that had occurred in a manor domain south of Nedain, Yuriah's troops had flown off to suppress a group of mercenaries which was taking advantage of the chaos to pillage villages. In order to guard against the emperor's faction amassing their forces, Rogue had divided his units and deployed them throughout the capital's surroundings.

The crown prince had only just left Solon, yet the country's internal situation was already collapsing.

What Ineli found hardest to bear was the thought that this might be due to her own mistakes. Originally, Odyne had been left in charge of the imperial capital, and, even though she had the title of princess, Ineli had little authority. For her, who was aiming for status even beyond that, this was both a matchless opportunity to increase her fame and a dangerous situation in which an error could block off her entire future.

However, since the incident of the forceful bombardment on the temple, the watch placed on her had grown stricter. Odyne had personally selected some of his trusted subordinates and had appointed them to the princess' side.

One of their duties was to send away the officers and nobles who came to request a meeting with the princess, which led to malicious gossip – *That damned Odyne. Plotting to take advantage of this situation so that he'll be the only one to reap the benefits.* Odyne Lorgo, however, was absolutely not going to bend his own policy. At this late stage, he was ill-suited to throwing his lot in with those who wished to curry favour with the imperial princess.

Ineli herself finally openly voiced her dissatisfaction with Odyne, and started criticising the general who was keeping her under house arrest in all but name.

At this point, the movements in their surroundings once again showed signs of changing. Although the current chaos did have a side to it which was a confrontation between the "Emperor faction" and "Crown Prince faction", for a portion of the people involved this was no more than an empty slogan, and their actions were similar to those of looters at the scene of a fire.

While there were quite a few people who judged that this would develop into a large-scale civil war, there were many more who were focused on how they should act so as to ensure their own positions in the aftermath, when the disturbance had died down.

Would it be better to refuse to cooperate with Odyne?

No, if we do that, things might get bad once the crown prince returns. Still, the relationship between Princess Ineli and His Highness is pretty good...

So if we're following the princess' orders, we shouldn't be charged with any crimes in the future.

Amidst the constant chaos within the capital, nobles and some of the military officers held these kinds of inappropriate meetings more than once.

It had not been ten days since Prince Gil had left and the emperor vanished from sight into the temple. In Mephius, where the emperor had formerly and arbitrarily dissolved the Council, there was no clear system in place to indicate where authority should be transferred to and converge. Simon Rodloom had always grieved about how much had been lost during the ten-year war with Garbera, and this had certainly not been needless anxiety on his part.

Then –

That day, Ineli Mephius had a visitor.

She was no longer staying in the inner palace, but had chosen a room reserved for the imperial family's use in the main palace as her centre of operations, and was lodging there.

With guards following her at all times, Ineli was unable to meet as she pleased with influential nobles and officers, so she spent each day sending out letters to all quarters, or answering requests for audiences from city and neighbourhood representatives. Currently, she was the only representative of the imperial family who could actually be met with.

It was evening.

Informed by the chamberlain of the visitor's name, Odyne's soldiers were momentarily perplexed as to how to handle this. They were to thoroughly enforce the

policy that – *unless they have my permission, no one of standing is to be allowed to meet with Her Imperial Highness.*

This person, however, was not just anybody. With no other choice, one of them hurried off to communicate directly with Odyne. For a moment, the general himself looked as though he was hesitating over the decision.

“It’s fine. Permission to pass,” in the end, he gave his authorisation.

Similarly, Ineli Mephius frowned when she heard her visitor’s name. *How vexing* – was the thought which flitted through her mind.

At present, however, she was the ruling family’s representative within Solon, the imperial capital. It was unavoidable that she should be the one to receive foreign guests.

“By all means, please come in,” Ineli personally opened her door to the visitor.

The one who entered gracefully – or rather, whose posture had her chest thrown out a little too much – was Vileena Owell.

Vileena herself was fully aware that she was a “vexing guest”. And not only for Ineli but for Mephius itself, now that it was being shaken by chaos.

Actually, when she had alighted in Solon, the welcome reception for her had met with some unexpected delays. When they had heard that the princess had been taken into Garbera, most people’s reactions had been along the lines of:

Doesn’t that make it unlikely that she’ll come back?

No, but until Mephius settles down again, you can be sure they’ll come up with some excuse or another to extend her stay over there.

They certainly had not expected her to return to Solon, her head still wrapped in bandages. Nonetheless, it went without saying that the princess was the crown prince’s fiancée and, even more importantly, she had recently distinguished herself by repulsing Salamand, the scoundrel who had broken across the national border. The populace was inclined to see her as a hero, and neither Odyne nor Ineli had any choice

but to welcome her.

Although she could guess what their feelings were, the princess deliberately avoided looking apologetic or making excuses. Still, as a matter of fact, she too had felt some hesitation when arriving in Solon.

She was apprehensive that, given the current state of unrest, her presence might invite more unnecessary trouble; plus there was the fact that very recently, an Imperial Guard had tried to take her life when they were by Garbera's border, and the mystery of who had been backing him had yet to be elucidated. Going further back in time, the ruffian who had set fire to the western village which had been taking care of her had also unmistakably called her "Princess Vileena" before swinging a blade at her.

Although it was not clear whether those two people were connected, somebody seemed to be after her life.

Would the sound of a gunshot echo the moment she stepped from the ship at Solon's port, or would someone lurking in the shadows of a building, an assassin's blade concealed at their breast, come swooping in to attack her? She *did* worry about it.

"When is His Highness due to return?"

"Well... since his purpose is to discourage Allion during its earliest manoeuvres, I do not believe that his absence will be particularly prolonged."

"Really? In that case, let's quietly await his return," she replied and, with her lady's maid, Theresia, in tow, she entered the inner palace.

Whoever it was who was out to assassinate her, she did not expect them to have laid their traps in Solon. And if they had, then –

I'll fight. Once in bed, she quietly gripped the gun beneath her pillow. Her breathing was uneven, and it was a long time before she was able to fall asleep.

The princess was undeniably "quiet".

But only for one day.

The very next, she requested a meeting with Ineli Mephius.

After hearing directly from Odyne about the situation in Solon, the princess learned what Ineli had been doing so far, and what her probable intentions were.

She's the same as me – Vileena thought, and somewhere at the back of her mind, she felt like smiling. She did not want to be a princess used only as a prize for a retainer or a tool for diplomacy, but wanted to be known as someone who was every bit as resourceful as a man, and who acted for the sake of the country.

Vileena herself felt that way. Nor did the royal princess want to consider that her wish to accumulate different experiences was merely a childish fantasy. Nevertheless, everything was subject to the trend of the times, and people themselves were suited or unsuited for different things, and so had to get along with others.

“It has been a long time, Princess.”

“Indeed it has, Your Royal Highness.”

The two of them exchanged greetings with unruffled composure, but, particularly in Ineli's case, the mood could not be said to be at its best. This princess, who was almost excessively straightforward, whose manner was like a blade that might strike down at any moment, might very well interfere with the present situation in Solon.

Vileena herself was more aware than anyone that – *the me from before would probably have acted that way.*

“For a time, Solon was humming with talk of how your military achievements are in no way inferior to those of any general, Your Highness.”

“I'm quite ashamed. Putting on armour and departing for the front is hardly ladylike. I truly hope that everyone in Mephius is aware that all Garberan women certainly do not act that way.”

Vileena turned her face down and Ineli laughed gaily as she sipped her tea. They discussed the matter with Salamand for a while longer.

“By the way, Princess. To what do I owe the honour of your visit today?”

“As a matter of fact, although I am a bit worried about doing so, there are some things that I would like to discuss about Empress Melissa.”

Here it is – when Vileena broached the main topic, Ineli's thoughts flashed across her face. She made the first move.

"The matter concerning Empress Melissa is..." Ineli's tone of voice grew soft, but there was a sharp glint in her eyes. "I am sure that you, as a guest from a foreign country, must find it exceedingly foolish. As a member of the imperial family, I am utterly shame-faced about it, but, as I am sure you understand, this is our country's problem. You could say that at this turning of the seasons, we must wash away the pus from the old era and settle matters with our own abilities. We will absolutely not allow it to disturb you, Princess. Please await my brother's return here in Solon without worrying about anything."

She gave her warning.

Opposite her, Vileena, looking as though she were suddenly pondering something, allowed a few seconds to pass.

"Naturally, this is Mephius' problem. Nevertheless, I believe that I, who came from Garbera to marry into your country, could be of help."

"What is it that you mean?" Ineli maintained her smile. Inwardly, however, she was cursing her opponent.

Damned hot-headed show-off.

This was one time when she absolutely could not borrow the princess' help. As Ineli herself had previously stated, Vileena had become famous in Solon for repelling Salamand. Add that to Crown Prince Gil's own reputation, and there were already voices loudly proclaiming that "they both are worthy of carrying Mephius into the next era."

Ineli wanted a chance to demonstrate her own ability. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and, in a way, she felt like thanking her mother for having so hastily run away.

"It is not hard to imagine that when you look at Mephius in its current state, Princess, it must seem very unreliable. Naturally, it is our responsibility and..."

"I have heard that the empress is sending dispatches from within the temple in which she asserts even now that the crown prince is an impostor, and that the child in her

belly is the legitimate successor to the throne.”

Vileena unexpectedly shifted the focus of conversation. Or rather, it gave the impression that she had parried Ineli, who had made a *straightforward* thrust.

The imperial princess unintentionally fell silent.

“The people who were formerly said to be part of the emperor’s faction are currently raising soldiers in all corners on the strength of those words in order to protect their own positions and vested interests, but their scale can actually be called very small. Since Mephius itself is falling into chaos, General Odyne Largo or General Rogue Saian are worrying about how to cope with the situation, but once His Highness Crown Prince Gil returns, this level of disorder should be settled in no time at all.”

“...”

“However, at that point” Vileena’s words were softly spoken. Her lips were formed into a faint smile, yet the contents of what she said abruptly turned stern. “Being driven into a corner and having lost her escape route, the empress will have no choice but to face ruin. Will she choose to fight until the last soldier, or will she choose suicide?”

“S-Suicide?”

“Or perhaps...” Vileena’s smile vanished. “Or perhaps, she might force His Majesty the emperor to accompany her. In which case...”

“In which case?”

“It would create a breeding ground for future problems. Very much... yes, very much so.” In a way, her words came across as threatening. Or rather, Royal Princess Vileena was unmistakably threatening Imperial Princess Ineli. Hidden behind her words was intimidation: if your mother is driven into a corner and the emperor, father of the country, is lost because of it, then it is *your* ability which will be called into question.

Naturally, Vileena’s expression displayed nothing but the concern of a noble lady for the country’s future.

“The retainers will again have the appearance of being coerced into obeying. Even when His Highness Gil Mephius undergoes coronation, the impression that will take root is that he is a ruler who slayed the previous emperor and empress, his own

parents, and who oppresses his subjects with no regard for them. The embers of dissent will continue to smoulder, and as soon as a strong wind blows on them once, they will flare up into an inferno that will once again divide the country in two.”

Those words were both ones that Vileena had prepared in advance with premeditated intent, and, at the same time, the reflection of her true feelings, and entirely free of lies.

A simmering storm.

Garbera had Ryucown and Salamand. In Ende, there was Lord Jeremie, who lost the struggle for succession. And in Mephius...

Quarrels and strife are constantly lying, lurking, within a country.

Vileena believed that it was a policymaker’s duty to prevent an opponent from fanning those sparks.

When Vileena Owell had arrived in Solon and had been informed of the situation there by Odyne, she had spent time at a loss in the room which had been allocated to her. It had not taken her a day to request a face-to-face meeting with Ineli, but that had been no snap decision, and during that day, she was plenty hesitant.

Since the crown prince is currently absent...

Those who are left behind, who are left in charge, have a duty to keep things safe.

“Theresia.”

The princess, who for some reason had been standing in front of a mirror since early in the morning, called out to the lady’s maid who had known her since she was born.

“Yes?”

“Am I a meddling princess?”

“I would not think it particularly strange if there were people who called you that behind your back.”

“Am I unsuitable for Mephius?”

“Not only Mephius but also our own Garbera and the neighbouring country of Ende. There isn’t a single land in which Princess Vileena would be called a model daughter of the royal family.”

Standing behind the princess, Theresia speech was perfectly blunt. Vileena didn’t even let slip a smile.

“Then I’m a heretic. If I’m not the product of Garbera’s history or Mephius’ culture, then neither needs to be ashamed of me, no matter what I do.”

“It sounds as though you are forcing a theory onto something, Princess. What is it that you are plotting now?”

“For the last times,” Vileena had closed her eyes for a moment, but then stared fixedly at Theresia’s face in the mirror. “This will be the last time. So... please forgive me, Theresia. As a princess of Garbera, as the fiancée to the crown prince of Mephius... this is the last time I’ll do something shameful.”

“I see.”

Even as she spoke – *that’s a lie* – was written all over Theresia’s face.

“Indeed, the princess is getting on in years. You have become slightly more mature. By telling me beforehand, you are ensuring that Theresia will not be scolding you later.”

“Theresia...”

“Do as you will, Princess.”

Theresia lowered her head, with its hair streaked with grey, just a little. Surprised, the young girl caught her breath.

“Princess Vileena is no longer simply the princess whom I serve. However words are played with, those who see you unmistakably see you as the one who bears the position of princess of Garbera, and fiancée to the crown prince of Mephius. It is because you know that better than anyone that you speak of ‘shame’, Princess.”

“ ... ”

“However, Princess... Although the things you do and say have sometimes left me dumbfounded, and have sometimes made me feel like fainting from shock, not once have I thought of you as ‘shameful’. Princess, you are my pride. Even if some point fingers at you or talk behind your back, whether it is of you as a member of the royal family of Garbera or in the palace of Mephius that you marry into, that alone will never change in all of this lifetime. Therefore, do as you will, Princess. Follow your heart with honesty.”

“Thank you, Theresia.”

As Vileena expressed her gratitude, her throat was a little clogged up, and there was a glimmer at the corner of her eyes. Standing in front of the mirror, the princess stretched out a finger to wipe those tears away. For some reason, however, she allowed her shimmering tears to spill onto her cheek as her white finger pulled down the corner of her eye.

“Beeh!”

She stuck out her tongue.

Ineli was lost for words with which to retort.

“Surely the empress cannot want to lead Mephius to its complete destruction.”

Vileena’s manner remained perfectly calm.

“The key question is whether the empress’ actions stem from a righteous cause that can guide Mephius’ future. That point is essential. Now that, as I mentioned earlier, she had declared that His Highness the Crown Prince is an impostor and that the child in her belly is the legitimate heir to the throne, the empress is effectively saying that she is expecting to shoulder the burden of governing Mephius. In other words, her cause is her right to bear responsibility for the country. And, in that case...”



Vileena Owell lowered her eyes for a moment. She was fully aware of her own personality. A critical moment needed the 'critical' expression. Which was why she deliberately hid her face.

"In that case, if I, Vileena Owell, a princess from an allied country, go to the temple in the capacity of 'negotiator', it will be impossible for her to either turn a blade against me, or to take me hostage while she makes her demands."

"..."

"How about it, Your Imperial Highness, Princess Ineli? Would you agree to let me go to the temple?"

"W-What are you saying?" Ineli was trembling in agitation, but she still firmly shook her head. "We could not possibly allow a princess, who has been left in our care by an allied country, to do anything so dangerous. If anyone should take the initiative of going, it is only right that I, Ineli, should do so."

"No, Your Highness. At present, you are the imperial family's representative in Solon. If anything should happen to you, Lady Ineli, the people would be thrown into even greater confusion, and only the lawless would rejoice."

Her tone held a note of sharpness. Faster than Ineli could reply to the implied criticism, Vileena continued her train of argument.

"Naturally, I am not suggesting that I should make a great show of visiting the shrine. That would agitate the populace and the other nobles, and would probably cause an unnecessary disturbance. Even if it may be necessary to send a messenger beforehand to inform the empress of my visit, we can use disguises in front of the people... right, for example, Princess Ineli, concerned for the emperor and empress' state of health might send someone with meals for them, or dispatch a doctor to them, and when we send people in on that kind of pretext, I can pretend to be a lady's maid and slip in among them."

Her saying 'when' made it sound as though the whole thing was already settled, but her next words were even more startling.

"I will, without fail, communicate your words to the empress. For that, Lady Ineli, I would like you to support me in this."

She even added ‘for that’... The way she was talking made it sound as though Vileena was responding to a request from the imperial princess.

Ineli Mephius looked as though she had suddenly been dumped into a rough and stormy night sea. As though she did not have time to gasp for breath before huge waves bore down on her one after another, and tossed her up and down.

Then, having come to that point, Princess Vileena added another outrageous suggestion. “How about holding a council, tomorrow morning, to which all the commanders and people of influence currently residing in Solon will be summoned? At that point, we will reproduce the conversation that you and I have just had.”

“...”

In other words –

The two of them would repeat their current exchange in front of the assembled grandees, pretending to say and hear those things for the first time.

Realising the intention behind it, Ineli’s ears turned red. It wasn’t only to ensure that her request would be accepted – the princess was worried about Ineli.

If the details of their conversation was broadcast, Ineli would avoid the accusation of being a coward who had sent the royal princess into danger while she shut herself away. Not only that, but if any results were obtained, the merit would surely be seen as being partly hers.

T-This, this brat!

Ineli Mephius chewed on the edge of her lips.

Ineli Mephius chewed on the edge of her lips.

Once, in far-off Apta, she had certainly cornered this ‘brat’. That girl had nothing but war and airships on the brain, and wasn’t even familiar with the culture of her own country, nor could even recite a single line of poetry. In front of that barbarian of a girl, Ineli had skilfully demonstrated her diplomatic finesse, and had magnificently entertained their foreign visitors. Vileena herself had been nothing but nervous throughout, but in the end, she had looked at Ineli in admiration and had requested to shake her hand.

And that worthless 'brat' was worrying about her and was trying to break a deadlocked situation that Ineli herself had only been watching with her arms folded. On top of that, she was saying that – *we'll do it together, the two of us*.

Emotions welled up within her like a raging fire – or not. Their eyes happened to meet, and, contrary to what might have been expected, it was Vileena's that were sparkling brightly. And it was Vileena who started in surprise. Although she had been planning to conceal her emotions and to talk with perfect detachment, in the end, here she was excitedly leaning forward and gazing *straightforwardly* at Ineli.

For a moment, the imperial princess of Mephius stared, dumbfounded, at the princess who was averting her gaze from her in embarrassment.

This girl...

She relaxed the strength on the teeth with which she had been biting her lip. She truly wasn't a girl who was any good at wiles.

At that moment, if Ineli's mental state had to be defined, it was that she recognised the Garberan princess as – *a rival*.

Forced to compete directly with what should have been a worthless brat, she had been made to recognise her own lack of ability.

One day, I'll defeat you – she firmly decided.

Right, one day.

The next day, the royal princess of Garbera and the imperial princess of Mephius reproduced their exchange. Using the atmosphere there as a guide, they brushed over the inconvenient bits and padded some other parts, but the general idea remained the same.

They also emphasised the threat that if the empress was driven into a corner, she might choose to kill herself and to take the emperor with her, as well the supposition that Empress Melissa would not lightly harm a princess from a foreign country.

Before Odyne and the influential nobles assembled there could catch their breath –

“I am truly grateful for the princess of Garbera’s solicitude. Everyone agrees that in this situation, we cannot simply stand idly by and watch. I have also heard that there is an alarming rumour out on the streets that Empress Melissa’s claim that she has the Emperor is untrue. If that is true... indeed, I feel that as Empress Melissa claims to have righteousness on her side, we must verify whether there is any truth to that claim.”

Ineli put on an air of innocence. The royal princess bowed her head, pretending to be deeply moved.

With the atmosphere becoming that of everything having been decided, General Odyne Lorgo hurriedly started to stand.

“Naturally, we cannot possibly allow the princess of Garbera to undertake such a dangerous task all alone. Odyne, I order you to accompany her.”

“A-Aye,” the imperial princess had perfectly chosen her timing, and Odyne found himself replying unintentionally. His face immediately flushed red, however. “Y-Your Imperial Highness. This is simply... this is simply too dangerous. If you would give me an order, please tell me to wear my sword and armour, and march alone into the temple,” he said.

He was, of course, completely opposed to Vileena visiting the temple. However, with a gesture that was half a sneer, half a rebuke, Ineli replied –

“General Odyne, do you really think that if you go like that, Empress Melissa will unfasten the tightly shut gates and let you in?”

Odyne could find no words of retort. Ineli’s words were the equivalent of stating that, other than the Garberan princess, no one present there would be able to get the empress’ attention. And in the first place, if Odyne could have solved things by himself, the situation would not have evolved into the current deadlock.

“However, I commend your spirit. Protect the princess even at the cost of your own life.”

The two girls had arranged things to perfection. When Ineli stood up, it was in exactly the same manner as the emperor, his cloak flapping.

“We will send a messenger to the temple this very day. With that in mind, please lend me two hundred of the Imperial Guards who answer directly to the emperor. In

accordance with the laws of Mephius, I, who have the right to exercise authority as the highest-ranking member of the imperial family currently in Solon, hereby take command.”

A certain sort of misgiving appeared on every face there, but the atmosphere was not one that encouraged anyone to speak. Ineli’s claim that she had “the right to exercise authority as the highest-ranking member of the imperial family” was patently untrue. Even if the blood had somewhat thinned over the course of history, there were, in Mephius, several boys who were distantly related to the imperial family. Moreover, since Ineli was Empress Melissa’s child from her previous marriage, she was not of imperial lineage.

However, no one, Odyne included, pointed this out. That was because they all recognised that at this point in time, with the entire country – starting with Solon – in chaos, somebody needed to clearly take on the role of leader. Although Imperial Princess Ineli had certainly been led to error because of her quick-temper, it was a fact that she was the only one attending to tasks as a representative of the imperial family. Ineli had been one of the causes of the disturbance, but she had also, so to speak, worked to extinguish the fire by preventing it from spreading further.

“If, by some unlikely chance, the ‘enemy’ was to take violent action,” Ineli Mephius’ expression turned grim, like that of a guardian deity to the country, “we will destroy that ‘enemy,’” she declared.

PART 3

It's dark.

The old man gazed at his surroundings with eyes that were as black as night.

He was in the deepest part of the underground of Solon's Dragon Gods' temple. Directly beneath the section of a mural that depicted the dragon god Mephius, a long staircase led down to this high-ceilinged room. The floor stretched out in white marble, while huge columns were aligned in orderly rows in the direction that the old man – that Guhl Mephius – was looking in.

The once snow-white silk cloth that he was wearing was slightly stained, exhaustion clung to Guhl's face like dirt, giving it a slightly dark discolouration, and there was no spark of vitality in his eyes.

From the day that the audience with Crown Prince Gil Mephius had ended, Guhl had tended to stay in his own chambers. He had not shown himself in public, the reason given being that his health had deteriorated.

Then, one night, a short while after Crown Prince Gil had left Solon –

He had been resting in his room when people who claimed to be messengers from Empress Melissa had appeared. They had drawn their swords and, in no time at all, they had mowed down the sentries who were guarding his room. He learned later that Melissa had won over the officer in charge of stationing the guards.

With an attitude that was the very definition of mock courtesy, they had said –

“Please accompany us, Your Majesty. If you remain here, you will be in danger. In order to lead Mephius to its rightful future, please escape from here for now,” and, carrying him on their shoulders, they had borne him off to the Dragon Gods' temple.

It had been more than ten days since then.

Guhl had been forced into the lowest level of the temple. A meal was brought to him once a day. Their manner was still ostensibly courteous, but it was clear that they had no intention of allowing him to take a single step out of here.

Melissa, the mastermind behind the plot – and the Emperor's spouse – had not shown herself. He had merely received an oral message from her.

"Your Majesty is exhausted, so I pray that you will wait a while as I take it upon myself to open the path towards the rightful future of Mephius in your stead. Before long, I will, without fail, return you, Your Majesty, to the throne of Mephius, the likes of which has no equal in this world."

Guhl did not tell her to do as she pleased.

Nor did he try to resist.

All day long, he simply remained within these shadows in which no light shone. When his meal was brought, he ate it mechanically.

During that time, what did he think about? What did he feel?

Nothing.

Guhl let out a voice that was not even a whisper.

I don't think about anything. I don't feel anything.

"That's a lie," a voice threw at him.

"What's a lie?" Guhl glared at a corner of darkness. "A lie, is it? What do you understand about me?"

"I understand. You're thinking. You never stop thinking. Where did you make a mistake? Or was this actually the correct path after all? Every moment that you are awake... no, even when you fall asleep you still keep questioning yourself over and over again in your dreams."

"The correct path. A mistake. There are no such things. If you say that what I did was wrong, then ruling through military might cannot be right."

"That might be so," the voice's owner showed no trace of mockery, and his tone was one of utmost sincerity. "If loosening the reins invites chaos, then drawing the reins too tight will cause the appearance of those people who cannot bear the suffocation. Humans cannot become gods, so perhaps they cannot govern over humans after all."

“I’ve no time for such philosophical views,” Guhl narrowed his eyes, looking as though his gaze could penetrate through the darkness.

Barely any light shone in that underground chamber, but it was currently evening. The view from the highest floor of the palace in Solon, the imperial capital, would spread out far, and to the west, one could surely see the Domick Flats, shining a brilliant red. Lowering one’s gaze and bringing it a little closer, to the manors and granaries in Solon’s surroundings, one would see the specks of human beings who were wiping away the sweat from the last of the day’s toil.

Within the palace’s corridors, soldiers on duty would either be patrolling, or standing guard. Guhl had loved, above all else, looking down onto the valiant sight of armour gleaming in the light of the setting sun.

“You are strong. A strong human being. I know better than anyone that, at the very least, that is what you strove to be.”

“ ... ”



“No... rather than saying that you strove to be strong, maybe it would be better to say that you strove to remove any weakness from yourself. You tried to eradicate all weakness not only from the country or from other people, but especially from yourself. Because you were a strong ruler. Because you were strong, both admirable and imposing, a great ruler who could shoulder the responsibility for everything that happened within the country, and who could lead the way to peace, and who could lead the way to peace. Because *you had to be*.”

The shadowy figure remained at a fixed distance from Guhl, neither approaching nor stepping further away. Only the voice oscillated between strong and soft as it spoke, sometimes so fierce that it seemed to hammer against the old man's ears, sometimes so gentle that it seemed to tickle them like a breeze.

“But Guhl. It is just as I said before: you are not a god. For all that you claimed that authority, the fact will not change that you are a flesh-and-blood human born from your mother's womb. Humans cannot incorporate all of the world's phenomena into their living flesh. So what do you think a human aspiring to be great should do?”

“What should he do?”

“Isn't that what you were thinking over, Guhl? After being ousted from the throne and brought like a captive from your own room to this cellar, isn't that what you have constantly, solely, been thinking over?”

Guhl gave a low groan. It was the same, however, as the meaningless words that a child might threaten an opponent with just before getting into a fight.

“Yeah, it's just as you said. I did *something* wrong, and the raised blade which should have protected the people, the blade whose edge should have been bathed in a light that illuminated the world, was smashed. But who can say what that *something* is? That's something for future historians to debate as they sit at their round tables.”

“You are, after all, but one person. Even so. If you could make even a single inference about that *something*, perhaps you could impart it to your son, Gil Mephius. Even if the life and value of a single human is infinitesimal, as generations pile up one on top of the other, by leaving our words for those who will come after, maybe humans will one day find a path that comes close to the truth. Guhl, don't religion and history, the tales of legend, the very lives of humans, exist for that sake?”

“ ... ”

At that person's voice, Guhl no longer answered, no longer got angry, no longer got agitated. No, if it had to be said, he was as unmoving as a statue. Yet the owner of the voice continued, as though he could see through to the very bottom of Guhl's heart,

"How long has it been since Lady Lana passed away?" He touched upon the part that Guhl least wanted touched, and the old emperor's eyes, as dark as night itself, suddenly opened wide. "When you lost Lady Lana, you were far more distraught than you had been after the loss of your father and mother. It's easy to imagine now how you rejected that weakness with all your being. You were different from your father, who had thrown the country into disorder... you were not a weak ruler – so as to convince yourself of that, you firmly shut the lid on your own heart and strove to become strong. One could say that you succeeded splendidly in that. But, at the same time, did you not demand too much strength from others, and from yourself? I think so."

The instant that the old emperor turned his face away –

"Guhl."

The shadowy figure, who up until then had maintained a fixed distance from him, was suddenly at Guhl's side. Close enough to feel breath against his ear.

"You must have already noticed it yourself. The world over which you reigned craves its next era. It hopes and wishes for you to leave. Your eyes are blind. Your ears can barely hear a person's voice. Be a strong ruler to the end. By willingly admitting your weakness, by accepting defeat, you will become an even stronger ruler, Guhl..."

"Is someone there, Guhl Mephius?"

Another figure approached from beyond the row of columns. One as skinny as a withered tree, yet its steps were firm.

Guhl, whose eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, was immediately able to make him out. Among the elders of the Dragon Gods' faith, this old man was probably the one considered to be at the very top. Guhl took the time to slowly look around him.

"There doesn't seem to be anyone here," he answered in a voice that had gone hoarse. "Or are you saying that your eyes, which excel at discerning the supernatural, can see someone other than me here? Is their heart beating, and does their blood flow?"

“Such nonsense. Emperor Guhl, looking at you like this, you are no different from any other lonely old man. With no luxurious toga, no crystal staff, no crown upon your head, no gallant soldiers standing to protect you, spear in hand, you are just like an elderly man talking to himself because there is no one else around.”

“Did you come all the way here just to say that? I’d heard that you couldn’t even get up anymore, but now that you’ve managed to get better, you have a strange way of entertaining yourself.”

“That’s right, I came here to make a fool of you,” the elder approached Guhl one step at a time. “You who have abandoned your former ideals, dreams and ambitions are no more than the empty husk of ‘Emperor Guhl’. Just like every other human, with the passing of the years, the spirit which maintained your desires has eroded. I once watched the future for you, so seeing you like this is lonely for me too.”

Drawing closer, they were now face-to-face. Yet the elder did not stop.

Emperor Guhl’s eyes once again opened wide. He had felt something. Cold that seemed to pierce his body, heat like a fire that could boil the blood inside him – a strange atmosphere that seemed to have altered the very world around him.

As they faced each other, the elder’s eyes seemed to be emitting a pale light. With the light from beneath his heavy, drooping eyelids came shock great enough to oppress body and mind, and it certainly licked against Guhl’s pale face.

“You bastard,” Guhl’s voice came out hoarse. It was the voice of a man whose throat was being squeezed by someone’s hands, and his expression was twisted with pain.

The elder had finally arrived within a hair’s breadth of Guhl. At that point, he should finally have stopped, but –

“Stop,” howled Guhl. “Don’t come! Don’t come any closer!”

That was how it seemed to Guhl. Even though the elder’s steps had stopped, he was still drawing closer to Guhl. *Something*, like a hazy flame imperceptible to the naked eye – yet at the same time, he could tell that it was the elder himself, that *something* that was like a soul, was being released from within that body that was like a withered tree. As though to prove that it had been released from the fetters of flesh, it continued to advance without stopping even as it came into contact with Guhl’s body.

“Guwaaaaah!”

The emperor’s knees hit the floor.

That fit itself perfectly over the emperor’s face, chest, arms and now started encroaching into the inside of him.

“I can no longer choose my means,” the voice seemed to ring from inside Guhl, striking directly against his brain. “I will be taking your body. At the very least, I will turn all of Mephius into my shrine. Every man, woman and child will become offerings to my sorcery. What, at most it will only be a matter of erasing a single country’s name from the map of the world. I have already witnessed such things so many times that I’m bored of it. I only need to do this once more...”

CHAPTER 5

DARKEST BLACK

PART 1

At that same time –

Through what twist of fate was it that the two people who, in Solon's palace, had once engaged in a battle without blades – Emperor Guhl Mephius and Orba, the former gladiator – had been forced into the same kind of predicament at the same time?

Orba's consciousness was still within that pitch-black darkness. The lights which had made it look like a starry night sky were still gathered together to form an old man's face, and those gigantic eyes seemed like they were enveloping Orba; when he opened his mouth wide, it was as though he were going to swallow Orba's insubstantial body whole, from the top of his head to the tip of his toes.

A sorcerer.

That, he understood. The man could be nothing else. And on top of that, he had spoken about 'Garda'. That was the name of a man that Orba himself had killed in the west, but, some time ago, when he had paid a brief visit to Taúlia, the famed strategist, Ravan Dol, had revealed that "Garda might be alive."

Did Garda have two or even three lives? Was the one Orba had defeated an impostor? At any rate, it did seem true that the man, who appeared to be one of Garda's subordinates, had set a magic trap and lain in wait for Orba.

Shit.

Orba tried to grind his teeth. But his physical sensations felt far away. As though his consciousness and his body had been separated and were dozens of kilometres apart, there was a considerable time lag between when his body showed a reaction, and when that reaction returned to him as a 'sensation'.

By the time he realised it, a cold fear had risen in a corner of his heart. If just one single part of his body were able to move freely, he would not fear any enemy trying to hinder

him. But now that even the sensation of having a body felt far away, he had no means to oppose the enemy.

As though reading his thoughts, the stars glittered distortedly, and a wicked smile formed on the old man's face –

Just as he was thinking so, one after another, they turned into shooting stars and flew wildly about, drawing trails of light as they did so.

He had no time to follow them with his eyes.

“Guh!”

Did his voice actually escape from his lips, or was it only in his mind?

As sharp as arrows let loose by a mighty warrior, the light crawled inside of Orba's body. Not just once, twice, or three times, the stars which should have been suspended in the air betrayed their own destiny, and overwhelmed him with their successive strikes.

No sooner had they wreaked white-hot havoc in his body that they reassembled and formed the old man's figure again. A body should, by nature, only admit the existence of a single soul within it, but now, a second being was starting to assert its presence inside of him.

Orba screamed from the intense pain. Maybe it was because being in the same fleshy container meant that the agony was also shared, but he could feel the screams of the old man who had introduced himself as Zafar reverberating inside of him.

“Who are you – who are you? Who. The. Hell. Are. You!?”

The darkness that was drifting before Orba's eyes now changed.

He could dimly make out Mephius' throne room. On the other side of a flight of stairs, Emperor Guhl Mephius sat in state.

For a second, Orba forgot about the pain as he stared at him. It was none other than the scene that he had experienced just ten or so days earlier.

The Emperor's figure seemed to flicker like a candleflame in the wind, and the pillars

with their decorative carvings, the tapestries on the wall, and the courtiers lined up on either side, all scattered into a thousand points of light, drifted for a moment, then formed another scene.

The next thing he saw was the glare of the sun that seemed to be baking the ground white. A man stood opposite him. Studded shoulder pads, a belt made from hide, and a curved sword in his hands.

Orba caught his breath.

Even though he had long forgotten his face but, confronting each other like this, it came back as vividly as though it were yesterday.

This was the man that Orba had confronted when he had first stood, sword in hand, in the arena – in other words, the first gladiator that Orba had killed.

The aggregation of stars forming the gladiator's shape soon changed and the lights once more scattered and dispersed.

It was like a mirror reflecting his memories. Scenes from what he experienced up until now were projected in no chronological order, with none of them being developed long.

Among those memories –

There was Ryucown, whom he had crossed swords with. There was Queen Marilène, walking forward even as the mob that surrounded her hurled abuse and threw things at her. There were many scenes in which he was leading soldiers on the battlefield. There was the instant in which he had leaped towards the sorcerer who had called himself Garda. There was the quiet night sky with its twinkling stars that he had looked up at with his brother, Roan, and their childhood friend, Alice. There was the evening hour in which heaven and earth seemed to blaze red as Orba held Shique's cold corpse...

Orba could do nothing to stop them.

It felt as though the sorcerer who had crawled inside him was groping through his memories and letting them all out.

It felt as though the sorcerer who had crawled inside him was groping through his

memories and letting them all out.

“Not a sorcerer? Not even a flunky to Barbaroi?” Zafar was gasping in pain, but there was a trace of doubt in his whispered voice. “Then, how? How could you, a lowly slave, a mere body-double set up by Fedom, have completely reshaped out diagram of Fate?”

While he spoke, Orba’s past continued to flickeringly appear and disappear.

“I don’t understand. It can’t be... Some ‘power’ must be interfering. If we’re talking about a hero, then the *signs* of a hero being born should have appeared beforehand. In which case, either amending the diagram of Fate or killing him in infancy would have been easy. Who is this bastard? It’s like he just appeared from some other world. So what...?”

Just as the old man’s voice suddenly died out, Orba’s past, which had been unfolding at dizzying speed, abruptly stopped dead.

It was a memory so vague that at first, Orba himself could not tell who was being projected in that scene.

The reflected scenery was that of Fedom’s town house in Solon. This he remembered. It had been a huge turning point in Orba’s life. Reclining back in a slovenly, arrogant manner, Fedom, the domain lord of Birac, had announced to him that:

“You’re going to become the Crown Prince of Mephius.”

Right, it was the moment when he went from being a gladiator to becoming Gil Mephius’ body-double. But the one who was holding Zafar’s attention was neither Fedom nor Orba. Next to the Lord of Birac was a person standing as still as a shadow. That man had left a uncanny impression on Orba. A strange man, who appeared young at first glance yet, depending on how the light hit him, who also seemed very old.

He’s... a sorcerer?

Orba suddenly realised. When he had been talking with Fedom, hadn’t he heard something about that man being responsible for putting the iron mask on him? Moreover, he was the one who, with just a touch of his fingers, had broken that mask – which had not budged in two years, no matter how much strength Orba had used on it – right in half.

What was his name?

Right, Herman – Orba remembered as Fedom called him that. However –

Impossible – a voice immediately rose in denial. Zafar's.

The scene that remained frozen in time and space started to shake.

Herman? That name... It can't be. The face is different as well... That man... no, that 'esteemed gentleman' is – is, without a doubt, Lord Garda's...

Meanwhile, Orba's body was still lying in the grass on the ground. Pashir was kneeling beside him and the Mephian soldiers formed a circle around them.

The Dairan soldiers had, by then, already found what was apparently the sniper who had taken aim at the prince. However, he had already died. He had apparently fired a desperate shot just before his flame of life had burned out. The bullet had missed however, immediately afterwards, there had been another soldier who had attempted to cut down the crown prince, but Gil had dealt with him himself.

On Kayness' orders, they had thoroughly searched the surroundings to check that there were no other enemies lying hidden.

Gil Mephius' chest was still heaving painfully, and his shoulders were violently rising up and down. "Bring His Highness into the mansion," suggested Kayness. "We were expecting a battle at dawn, so a number of doctors have already been summoned. They can treat him."

Pashir nodded and was about to follow the suggestion, but Orba's hand was still tightly gripping his arm. It bit into him with the strength of an iron band, and, after thinking for a moment, Pashir frowned.

"Orba," he glanced behind him.

Kain, in the iron mask, stared blankly back for a moment, not realising that it was his name which was being called. "Orba!" when Pashir barked at him in rebuke however, he hastily stood to attention.

“I’m leaving you in charge of my unit. Take the horses and go provide reinforcement to Lord Eric.”

“M-Me?”

Pashir signalled that, yes, him. Fundamentally, he would have preferred to go himself, but he felt that, as someone who knew Orba’s real identity, he had to stay by the crown prince. He was afraid that, during the course of the medical treatment, it would be all too easy for him to be unclothed and for the slave brand to be exposed.

“Fly the flag of Mephius as obviously as you can. Loudly advertise that we’ve defended Dairan. That way, we’ll be able to unnerve the enemy while raising morale on Ende’s side.”

“It’s fine, Orba. I’ll go with you,” Gilliam stepped forward.

They still did not know what Eric’s situation was. The three hundred soldiers who would march forward would also serve as a large-scale reconnaissance party. Kayness Plutos would chose men from among the survivors of Darowkin’s unit, and send them with them.

“They’ll take you to the best place to cross the river with the horses.”

“Much appreciated. Right then, come on, Iron Tiger,” said Gilliam, leaping onto a horse as though in part to spur ‘Orba’ on.

“Aaaye,” Kain, disguised as ‘Orba’, answered in a despairing tone, having apparently resigned himself as he also clambered onto horseback. “Later, when His Highness the Crown Prince wakes up, I’m getting at least one sarcasm in.”

Kain positioned himself in the vanguard and, with Gilliam acting as his adjutant, they started off with their three hundred men with the Dairan soldiers serving as their guides.

The clouds of dust that they kicked up were carried away by the wind and vanished in the pitch-black darkness.

It was not yet dawn.

PART 2

Lance Mazpotter galloped at the head of the cavalry unit.

Although he was past his prime as a warrior, he still cut a very dashing figure as he leaned forward and drove his horse onwards. With the light from the airship acting as a signpost, he was in the middle of chasing down Lord Eric of Ende.

Judging that they were closing in, Lance held a spear beneath one arm. He was managing the reins with one sturdy arm, and his single eye gleamed sharply at the signs that bloodshed was once more imminent.

But then, the unexpected occurred.

A messenger soldier caught up with Lance –

“What, His Highness?”

Hearing the report, Lance had no choice but to stop the horses. Kaseria Jamil’s attack force on Dairan had retreated.

When he looked back towards the south, faint flames and white smoke were rising under the starlight. The attack should have been a success. Once the enemy camp had been set alight, the blaze stocked Kaseria’s fighting spirit and lust for slaughter, and those would not be satisfied with such a short time to rampage.

The situation was unclear.

“Aaye,” Lance was a man who had experienced innumerable battle fronts. He was not so ambitious or impetuous that he would lose his judgement over the bait dangled enticingly in front of him.

“Messenger, lead us to His Highness. All of you, come!”

Coming to a snap decision, he forcefully hauled his horse’s head around and set off after the messenger.

Prince Kaseria Jamil of Allion, meanwhile, was also on horseback, riding hard as his body was jolted up and down.

He was nowhere near as calm as Lance. The sense of slaughter he had just experienced in Dairan and the reverberation of cannonfire were like a trail he drew behind him, his eyes were still hazy from the “bloodlust, his muscles demanded their next victim as soon as possible, and beneath his armour, his breathing was ragged and rough.

But above all else –

That man...

More than for the crimson blood, more than for the dying screams, more than for the pitiful trembling, which traveled through his sword to his muscles when the steel ran through his victims, that was what the prince of Allion was strongly crying out for in his mind.

That dark-skinned Mephian warrior who had fought with him on equal terms.

His form was constantly etched into the underside of Kaseria’s eyelids, the response to their clash of steel still lingered in his arm. Not only had he not been able to bring him down, he had been wretchedly driven away.

Looking behind him, he saw only the lingering trails of dust that they had kicked up, and there was no sign that the enemy had left Dairan in pursuit. Kaseria spat out spittle and curses.

“Shit, shit, shit!”

If they’d gotten cocky and chased us, we could have ambushed them.

He could not understand why they were not giving chase. But because of it, Kaseria thirsted for blood all the more. Only by immersing himself in battle as soon as possible would he be able to drive that swordsman, who he had not been able to defeat, from his mind.

And at that moment, Kaseria Jamil got lucky.

North of Dairan, soldiers were waiting by the river with lights to guide them across, but in order to shake off any enemy pursuit, he had deliberately taken a different and more tortuous route, which was when they unexpectedly came across another party.

It was Lord Eric’s unit, which had only just descended from the high ground with their

comrades' charge acting as their screen.

At first, Kaseria had not even imagined that the lord of Ende was among them. But when he saw the shadowy figures of what seemed to be enemies –

“Halt where you are!” he cried, and charged without letting them answer.

“Enemies!”

“Protect the Prince!”

It was the other party's shouts that made him realise it. He did consider that it might have been a feint to lure them, but judging from the spirit with which they all steadfastly raised their swords, axes and spears, and took up defensive positions, he decided that it was not a lie.

Kaseria instantly broke into a smile. A smile that could almost be called innocent.

“Is Lord Eric there? My name is Kaseria Jamil, First Prince of Allion,” he roared, and from horseback, he struck out with the sharp tip of his blade.

His opponents loudly accepted the challenge.

“Woah, this is our chance to win.”

“Thanks be to the spirits for their divine grace. Slay Kaseria!”

As though echoing their fervour, Kaseria and his troops gained even greater impulse.

Shielded by his comrades, Eric Le Doria for a moment stared, dumbfounded, at the mounted warrior who seemed about to cleave his way straight to him.

That's Kaseria?

Like a young branch shaken in a storm, even though he was on horseback, he was moving constantly, bending left and right, spurred on by his own recoil, and unleashing sword thrusts in rapid succession. He was unquestionably skilled, but –

Isn't he like any other hothead?

Eric had let his comrades sacrifice themselves to allow him to leave the battlefield. His blood was boiling feverishly. He grabbed his own spear and raised it to eye level. The tip was pointed straight at Kaseria Jamil, who had just beheaded another Endean soldier.

By now the battle front had stretched out so wide that no single person could have been able to grasp a complete picture of it. All around, it had devolved into confused mêlées. Wherever a drawn blade gleamed, a sharp spear retaliated, armours clashed against each other in a crash of noise, and cries of every description echoed through the night.

Ende and Allion both originated from the same Magic Dynasty. Although the form and names differed somewhat, the same belief in spirits was handed down in both, and voices could be heard on all sides calling to the spirits for protection.

The horses' hooves and the infantrymen's feet sharply tilled the soil, and fresh blood watered it incessantly like red rain.

The 'wind' was blowing confusedly. Just when an allied unit seemed to be pushing forward overwhelmingly, carried from behind by the 'winds' of victory, the enemy, which should have been scattering, would unexpectedly met with allies, causing the 'wind' to suddenly shift and blow in the faces of the previous victors.

Even a man like Lance Mazpotter was toyed with by the chaos. He had been riding to join up with Kaseria's forces, but the messenger, who had been serving as their guide, had lost sight of their destination. Which was only to be expected given that Kaseria had followed his instinct and changed his course this way and that, until he eventually ran into Lord Eric's force, which Lance himself had originally been chasing. Even the prince's messenger, who should have alerted his allies to this fact, was wandering hopelessly around the battlefield, looking for someone somewhere that he could notify.

Lance was made to feel that he was on a fool's errand. Clicking his tongue, he was wondering whether he should call an airship and send out scouts when he spotted a group approaching from the south. He realised that they must be reinforcements sent out from Dairan.

Although naturally, he didn't go so far as to grasp that this was a unit comprising

Mephian soldiers, he could tell at once that – *there's not that many of them.*

He did not have eyesight that could see through the darkness, but he was a man who had spent most of his life at war. He understood instinctively from the sound of hooves, the clank of the harnesses, and the amount of wind they kicked up.

Which meant that Kaseria had not just recklessly gone charging in the dark. The enemy should have sent out reinforcements upon receiving the messenger from Lord Eric, and there should have been more of them. Was it thanks to Kaseria that the enemy numbers had been thus reduced?

Lance decided to go out and meet these newcomers from the south so as to prevent the frontlines from becoming even more chaotic. On the other side, they also noticed this group which had quickly moved into a line to block their way.

They were roughly equal in number.

Kain, who was leading the Mephian forces, could have chosen to step back at that point.

“Who goes there?”

“Orba the Iron Mask, spearhead to His Imperial Highness, Crown Prince Gil of Mephius!” but the path of retreat was cut off the moment he answered Lance’s call.

“Mephius?”

A look of surprise swept over Lance’s face. He had not expected that not only Garbera, but also Mephius, which was supposed to have a tense relationship with it, would show up here.

“Turn back now,” Kain shouted as he drew his sword. “We proceed forward in honour of His Imperial Highness Gil. This cannot be what Allion expected. To retreat here will bring you no shame.”

Perhaps he unintentionally sounded so old-fashioned because he was aware that he was putting on a show.

“I’m much obliged for your concern,” Lance, however, remained perfectly calm.

The enemy's numbers were about the same as their own and there was no sign of reinforcements coming to back them up, so he took a firm grip on his spear and put himself at the ready.

"In my ignorance, I do not know the name 'Orba', but you have all the appearance of being a brave known throughout the three countries. I, Lance Mazpotter, will personally keep you company," Lance was all the more a gentleman when he was on the battlefield.

He had decided to take on this unit so that Mephius' participation would not affect Kaseria's main force. With that in mind, he should spread out his position and cut the enemy off from the north, then, if more reinforcements arrived, they could gradually pull back their line of defence.

Seeing that he had not been able to shake the enemy, Kain steeled himself. If the flag of Mephius was to fly undaunted, then he no longer had any other choice but to move forward.

"Kain," Gilliam whispered in his ear. "This guy's good. You'd do best to stare him down and hint that reinforcements are coming. Dairan is nearby. The enemy won't want to be kept in one place for too long, so they'll be quicker to get antsy."

Before becoming a gladiator, Gilliam had seen active service as a soldier. He had a far better understanding of the subtleties of the battlefield than Kain did. Kain also knew what Gilliam was getting at, but –

"What it is? You're the spearhead to the Crown Prince of Mephius, aren't you? I said I'd keep you company. So aren't you coming?"

When he heard himself being ridiculed, he could not stay silent. He was not the usual 'Kain'. He was currently wearing the iron mask.

It's fiine, I just need to prod them a little and the enemy will retreat, right – he answered Gilliam in a low voice then raised his sword high.

"Well then, here I come!" he shouted as he kicked his horse's flanks.

Lance drove his horse forward at the same time. With the riders galloping from both sides, they soon collided.

Their weapons did not cross.

Kain's sword never reached as Lance's spear struck him in the chest.

He fell from his horse.

"Splendid."

Lance said in a loud voice as he turned his horse around and returned to where Kain had hit the ground.

"Is what I'd like to say, but..." he smiled down from horseback, like a father looking a son who was not very bright, "let it be known throughout Mephius, famous for its might, what happened to the Crown Prince's spearhead. I, Lance, have taken Orba's head."

Gilliam did not even have time to shout at him to stop.

After his spear, he now took his sword – a slender, crescent-shaped blade that he had often used when he served Atall – adjusted his grip on it, and dexterously slashed out.

As blood spurted, Kain's head fell with a thump.

He did not cry out once before he died.

All the colour had drained from Gilliam's face. Before his eyes, Lance snapped his fingers. An enemy soldier noiselessly drew up and crouched down, stretching his hand out towards the iron mask. He probably intended to pluck it off as a war trophy.

At that moment, as though erupting from the ground, voices resounded all around Gilliam. Pouring from the mouths of the Mephian soldiers were wordless roars, cries, noise, curses...

"W-Wait!" Gilliam turned back but, once again, he was not in time to stop what happened.

Orba, the swordsman in the iron mask, was the subordinate that Crown Prince Gil Mephius trusted the most. Whenever Prince Gil undertook some heroic activity, Orba would unfailingly take part in the fray. Even with his outstanding swordskills, he was often entrusted with undercover missions, never feeling the need to advertise his own

achievements any more than necessary, and never voicing a word of complaint.

Among the Mephian soldiers, there were those held the belief that – *he is the very ideal of a warrior*.

Orba had been defeated.

And mocked.

And now, they were about to strip him of his mask. That was showing contempt for every shred of dignity that he had in life.

It was hardly surprising that the Mephian soldiers let out a roar and started to charge. Leaving Gilliam behind, they hurled their horses past him.

Clicking his tongue as he did so, Gilliam spurred his own horse forward. He could feel the blood going to his head. Or, perhaps because he had known Kain for a long time, he might have been even more worked up than any other of the soldiers.

As a result, the front lines were extended to this point which vaguely coincided with the northern border.

PART 3

When war approached, the people of Dairan went through orderly motions.

They closed the windows and bolted the doors. They blew out the candles. Holding their children, mothers went to hide in cellars or in granaries, while the men either took up weapons to protect their homes, or they assembled in one place and got ready in case a group of riders, their sheepskin cloaks flying in the wind, somehow managed to break in.

They were used to that kind of situation.

But this night, the people of Dairan were unusually frightened. And not only because of the assault that Kaseria had led.

The townspeople could not dispel their fear and unease even after Kaseria's forces had been driven away by Mephius' troops.

The cause, along with the ever increasing sounds of war and the news that Lord Eric stood isolated on the battlefield, was because of the roars of dragons, repeatedly reverberating.

Several kilometres south of Dairan, the dragons had suddenly grown unruly. The large-sized Houban, who had been pulling the cage, had toppled over while foaming at the mouth. The three hundred soldiers who were travelling thought at first that it had been shot by enemies lying in ambush somewhere.

However, inside the cage, which had toppled over at the same time, the dragons had all simultaneously started struggling and howling, and even the intrepid Mephian soldiers were getting ready to flee. A rampaging dragon made no distinction between friend or foe. No matter how outstanding a trainer was, calming dragons sent into a frenzy by blood, and especially several at the same time, was impossible.

Hou Ran was no exception.

Although her complexion had changed colour, she called out to the dragons, desperately trying to soothe them, but the scales that reflected the distorted light thrown on them by the soldiers' torches continued to heave, and they opened their maws wide, drool trailing from their fangs, to howl in terror.

“Run!” Miguel, who had been left in charge of the unit, yelled, his face ashen. Losing the dragons would be a mark of his own ineptitude, but losing a full three hundred soldiers would be far worse.

“Hurry inside Dairan! Oi, Loire, galop on first and tell the gatekeepers to thrown open the gates. Have them assemble riflemen!”

A little further east from that point, which was almost as noisy as the battlefield, within the high grass was the sorceress, Tahī.

She was licking her moist lips.

From time to time, she parted them as though to emit her voice, but absolutely no sound escaped.

Only Tahī could hear the voiceless voice that she was exhaling, and not with her ears, but with her consciousness.

How many sorcerers would believe, if it were explained to them, that in doing so, she was manipulating the small amounts of ether that dwelt within the dragons? Most would probably be sneering before the explanation was even half over, having decided that was just the nonsense of a fool who was ignorant of the basics of sorcery.

This was anything but normal magic.

Sorcery existed solely thanks to ancient artefacts, and to be able to handle ether through one’s own living flesh was possible only for beings that far transcended humanity. Such as, for example, the Dragon Gods that were said to have ruled this world in the far distant past.

Tahī had been born with this extraordinary talent and had received the teachings of the elders of the Dragon Gods’ faith, allowing her to polish her skills and her power. They called her: “A rarely-seen success.”

To be accurate, they said that she was ‘the second’.

Take, for example, how Jeremie, the former First Prince of Ende, had once used the power of magic tools that were handed down within the country to incite wild dragons into attacking Dairan. If it had been Tahī, she would only have needed to approach within a fixed distance and ‘talk’ to the ether within the dragons.

In order to manipulate several dozens of them at will, she would of course need to rely on the help of magical tools and to make preparations beforehand, but if it was simply to make them agitated, then it was just a matter of awakening the wild nature that slept within them.

In all honesty, this task was so boring that she couldn't help but yawn.

Zafar's instructions were to keep Hou Ran in check. Apparently, she had gotten in the way when he had previously tried to assassinate the crown prince. In order to prevent that from happening again, he seemed to want Tahī to use her sorcery to lure her away. Still –

How stupid, Zafar. Are you getting scared, at your age?

Tahī found it strange. Keeping someone occupied was so half-hearted. Wouldn't it be easier to just kill her?

Collecting the thoughts that were flying from her, she concentrated them into a single image around her forehead. The crimson 'wave' that Zafar had observed in the city of Idoro gradually intensified before being released, as sharp as a spear.

Her aim was unerring, and it struck a Baian who was struggling as though to break out of the cage.

It was just as Hou Ran had stretched out her hand through the gap between the bars. The Baian gave a start, its scales heaving, then, as though in response to Hou Ran's action, it nudged its head closer to her. As Ran approached it with her own face, it opened its jaws wide, and bit down towards her with fangs that could crunch through the bones of a horse or an ox.

Hou Ran looked up in shock, and reflected in her eyes was the shape of a crimson 'wave', coiling around the Baian's forehead.

The next second, a spray of fresh blood drenched the surroundings and the dragons who were hit by it, driven to crave more flesh, and more blood, rushed to attack the Mephian soldiers...

– was what was supposed to happen.

In that instant, however, it was Tahī herself who was struck hard and staggered back.

There was no visible injury. For a moment, she was stunned, not understanding what had happened. And then she realised: in the space of a breath, the 'wave' had flown backwards and had come crashing against her.

A single word had ridden along with the wave. One which made no sense to Tahī.

It sounded something like: "Milbak."

And as she came back to her senses, she noticed a figure approaching, eyes fixed straight at her.

Hou Ran.

Perhaps she had followed Tahī's thoughts and detected her presence, for now she was pushing her way through the waist-tall grass, unfalteringly closing the distance between them, one step at a time.

She did not ask who Tahī was. Or rather, there was something strange about her. Her gaze held no trace of emotion as she stared at Tahī. No hostility, no hatred, no suspicion, no friendly feelings either, of course. There was something about them that had the vastness of a dream, as she simply approached in silence.

Even Tahī found it uncanny.

At the same time, realising that what she was feeling was probably fear, she was furious at herself.

As though that emotion was manifesting itself, a burning red flame was at Tahī's raised arm. It coiled around it like a live dragon, and with a flourish of her supple limb, she hurled it free.

With an ominous roar, it charged towards Hou Ran.

Yet Ran did not halt her steps.



She looked as though she had not even noticed it, but just before the flames would engulf and kill her, she too raised her slender arm to above shoulder-level, and waved it once.

It was the same gesture as though she was swatting away an insect, and the dragon of flames vanished entirely.

“Whaat!” Tahī was utterly dumbfounded.

At the same time, something that was like clear wind seemed to surge up from Hou Ran then change into a spiral ‘wave’ that attacked Tahī.

With no time and no way to escape it, she was struck straight in the forehead by the ‘wave’.

She collapsed.

That...

Just before she lost consciousness, she heard what sounded like another person’s voice.

That woman, she definitely...

With the sound of the sorceress sinking into the meadow, Ran’s eyes suddenly opened wide.

From her manner, it was as though she had just woken up. She stared restlessly about her. After which, without taking the slightest notice of the inert Tahī, she hastily returned to the cage where the dragons were still showing lingering signs of excitement, and, sometimes gently, sometimes in stricter tones, addressed each one in turn.

Seeing the dragons gradually calm down, Miguel Tes was left speechless. In all honesty, when this dragon handler had left the cage, he had believed that even she was running away and abandoning her duties.

At Miguel’s command, the soldiers, who had likewise dispersed, timidly returned. Ran left them in charge of hauling the cage while she jumped onto a Baian. She used neither saddle nor reins. Riding with the back of the dragon’s neck between her knees, Ran

emitted a sound and, as though being controlled by an invisible bridle, the Baian started forward.

“W-Wait!” Miguel hurriedly spurred on his horse and chased after her. “Where are you going?”

Ran did not answer. He could tell from her profile however that she was frantic.

Eei – having been left in charge of the dragons and the ‘dragon girl’, Miguel lamented that this time as well, there might be no opportunity to render distinguished service. Realising that she apparently intended to ride into town, he called out,

“Loire, one of my men, is supposed to have gotten the gates opened. I’ll go ahead and explain the situation to the soldiers. Got it, dragon girl? Tell His Highness how Miguel Tes took command of things. Hey, do you hear me?” Miguel yelled, the wind blowing straight at him as he increased his horse’s speed.

Just as he had said, he arrived at Dairan first, and requested of the Dairan and Mephian riflemen that had been assembled thanks to Loire’s message that they allow the dragon rider following after him to pass into the city.

“That’s one eccentric rider, you know? You might be surprised at first glance, but she’s carrying out a secret mission for His Highness.”

Ran, riding as one with the dragon, swept like the wind through the gates of Dairan.

The ones who saw this, for all that they were the self-proclaimed fearless soldiers of Dairan, could not repress their dread at the sight. Yet, that night, a seven-year-old boy happened to peep down from the window he had opened on the third floor.

During Kaseria’s attack, he had been evacuated to the roof with his mother, but since things were considered to have finally settled down, he had gone back to his room. And no sooner had he done so, than he saw a woman galloping on a dragon right beneath him. He thought that the sight of her, rushing headlong in the silent night, riding on everything that was wild and untamed, was –

So pretty.

Hou Ran finally arrived near the Plutos’ fortified mansion. This was just as Orba was about to be carried inside.

“What’s wrong?” while Pashir, who was at his side, called out in surprise, she leaped down from the dragon and raced as fast as she could towards Orba.

Orba, his face pale, was still muttering incoherently. For a second, Ran raised her hand as though she was about to slap him.

Before the soldiers had time to stop her, however, she seemed to think better of it and did something which astounded everyone there.

She leaned in and sealed Orba’s lips with her own.

CHAPTER 6

PLANETARY FIRE

PART 1

In an instant, cracks seemed to run through space. Something like heated iron bit through them and forced itself within.

Screams of pain rose from Orba's mouth. Zafar's parasitic existence was already inside him, and now some other foreign substance was creeping in. It felt as though his skin was splitting and his muscles were being torn off, and unable to bear the agony, he screamed.

Guaaaaaah!

Zafar also appeared to be experiencing the same excruciating pain, and the old man's face, drawn from stars, was also being pulled about and distorted.

Orba and Zafar, the two whose spirits' were occupying that space, looked over at the same time. From the other side of the cracks running through space, a wave of even deeper darkness was surging forward.

It too contained stars of various sizes. Some burned blue, others shone red, others still twinkled gold/with a golden hue.

At the same moment –

There was another person, in a separate place, who was also witnessing the expanding ocean that was about to utterly engulf Orba and Zafar's consciousnesses.

Guhl Mephius.

On the lowest floor of the temple to the Dragon Gods' faith in Solon, the Emperor, likewise confronting a sorcerer, fell to the ground and writhed around, froth bubbling at his lips. The sorcerer's own body was right before him, but its consciousness had been released from it and was attempting to infringe on Guhl. The protective walls that should have been able to defend his soul were easily broken through, and the

outside intruder was gradually crawling into him.

The pain was unimaginable. It was, so to speak, the same kind of fight that Orba was currently experiencing. Someone other than himself was forcibly pushing into his body and mind, stealing Guhl Mephius' own self, and 'transferring' it to another being.

Guhl – the emperor who had reigned over all of Mephius for so long – writhed on the temple floor, wailing uncontrollably. He even felt that if he had known that he would experience pain so intense, he might have preferred to let a foreign enemy invade and be put through the fires of their aggression.

Anyway, what attachment do you have left to this world? A voice whispered enticingly. Yet even so, Guhl twisted his body until his bones snapped, and clawed at the floor with his nails. As a human being whose instincts were surfacing, all he could do was resist.

Then, during that strange struggle, Guhl 'saw' without seeing. Or perhaps it was the past, the memories, or the historical knowledge of the one who was trying to encroach on him. As he watched, Guhl's spirit was filled with a dark ocean inlaid with lights.

Within that darkness, something advanced, roaring thunderously.

It looked both like a huge pyramid, and like a large, ceremonial warship.

At long last, having crossed the sea of stars, what appeared before Orba, Zafar, and Guhl was a vivid blue sky. No sooner had it landed on the surface in a thick cloud of dust, that it turned into a city whose countless grey spires pierced the heavens.

That however did not seem to be welcome on this earth. From what Orba could see, throngs of strange, repulsive creatures immediately started attacking the city.

Although the way they ran on the ground with two legs was entirely human-like, scales grew all over their hides, they had long tails, and, more than anything, they had the projecting snouts of reptiles. Their black eyes that looked like glass marbles goggled and rolled about as they moved; they held long, two-pronged spears, and descended on the city like an avalanche.

It was not only the creatures' appearance, but also the fight itself which seemed mysterious in Orba's eyes. When the creatures, which looked like some kind of cross between dragons and humans, brandished their spears, the pointed tips released

flashes of blueish light. That light drilled holes in the ground and penetrated through rocks, yet it bounced off the walls of the city time and time again.

On the other hand, the warship, which had transformed into a city once it struck the ground, was carrying out a strange counterattack from within its structure. With no sound either of wheels or of cogs being turned, part of the wall spontaneously removed itself, and a cluster of gigantic needles appeared from inside of it. They then emitted red flames before soaring into the sky, drawing trail of smoke behind them.

The needles chased after the enemy as though they possessed a will of their own, and exterminated the creatures while sending soil whirling up like columns of water.

That's...

For a second, Orba forgot even the pain that was tearing his body apart as he gazed at the strange spectacle. And while he was staring, night arrived without him realising it, then, in the space of a blink, the morning sunlight had swooped down.

The fighting repeated incessantly.

For a second, Orba forgot even the pain that was tearing his body apart as he gazed at the strange spectacle. And while he was staring, night arrived without him realising it, then, in the space of a blink, the morning sunlight had swooped down.

The fighting repeated incessantly.

The city had already crumbled, unrecognizable compared to its original form. Its solid walls had turned into debris, scattered here and there, and many of its spires were broken. Above all else, no human figure, or even a hint of their presence, could be seen within.

Its aggressors were nowhere to be seen either, and only the desolate wind seem to blow there.

No –

There's... someone.

Orba could see a tiny figure clambering over the walls that had turned to rubble, and heading towards the central part of the construction.

It looked like a young man.

That slender figure vanished inside the building through a fissure that ran through its central section.

Decades must have passed in the blink of an eye, for when the figure emerged once more from inside the fissure, the youth had turned into an old man with white hair.

The old man held up what he was holding. Curved in shape and gleaming white, it looked like the fang or claw of some giant beast.

“Magnificent,” he whispered, in a voice so clear that even Orba could hear it.

There were no other sounds. Thinking about it, not only were there no humans in this forest, there were no birds or beasts, or even any sign of any other living creature.

“This planet... the Dragon Gods and their civilisation have given me so many approaches that science could not. It’s hard to believe that I used to play with those codified formulas. Paths open one after another, and each and every time, a hundred... a thousand new doors appear before me. There is no doubt that what I seek lies beyond that endless line of doors. Yes, if I can unravel what the Dragon Gods were attempting to perform once they perceived the signs of their own degeneration, even the dream of immortality might be... Even the ideal world that everyone dreams of but that no one has ever been able to build. But it’s not enough. The time allotted me in my lifespan is absolutely not enough. No... ten, twenty lifespans would still be insufficient.”

...

“I need a new body. If I inject the data that I obtained from the ruins into this ‘claw’, I might be able to digitize my soul and inject, or transfer, it to a new body. So that I can verify the link between the Dragon Gods and the Ryuujin tribe. Even that would be miraculous, but it is not yet perfect immortality. To find what I seek, I still need to pry open so many doors. And for that, one day, I will definitely set foot in ‘Barbaroi, the land of savages^[3]’, where the living witnesses to the ancient civilisation still reside.”

The old man smiled faintly.

“That humans were led to this planet... yes, it was fate. Destiny. It was necessary for evolution. I will create a new history with my own hands. Even if it takes me hundreds,

thousands of years. Humans will be freed from the shackles of flesh and attain the spiritual nature of gods, then a perfect society will surely emerge on this new planet.”

Uncertain of what it was he was seeing and hearing, Orba had simply been washed over by the flood of information, but now, for some reason, strong emotions suddenly welled up within him.

I will create history... a world – the revulsion that he felt at the old man’s words, at the smile curling across his lips, made him want to reject them with all his might.

In the end, however, Orba’s powerless emotions were left adrift as the scene he was witnessing, along with the old man’s laughter, were soon carried away by the wind, and the entire land itself soon vanished.

Just before it did so, an old man’s scream overwhelmed his hearing.

No, not the same old man that he had been watching just a moment ago. The one who was screaming was Zafar. He had been the first to succumb to the almost unbearable pain of those indescribable scenes – of the information flowing directly into his mind. “What... is this? What are you showing me? Damn you... who are you? Who are you!”

Repeating the questions that Orba had previously had for him, Zafar groaned in agony. As though in inverse proportion to his suffering, Orba could feel the agony slowly receding from his body. Instinctively, he understood that Zafar was being separated from him.

In this vast expanse of space, which might be the universe itself or mountains in the night, pillars of flame now erupted upwards from all sides.

The sky was the colour of dawn, the stars were scattered over it like drops of blood, and even the horizon burned red.

“Your Highness!” Pashir’s voice struck against his earlobe.

When Orba opened his eyes, he was met with a feverishly hot wind, dazzling light, and the feel of something soft. The area was surrounded by fire. The soft sensation came from Hou Ran’s body, which was covering his torso. He closed his eyes for a second and didn’t move. Judging by the startled faces nearby, it seemed that he had lost consciousness.

“You’re well.”

“Yeah,” Orba replied hoarsely.

He felt as though his body and consciousness were still not quite aligned with one another, and he was slightly dizzy.

“What... happened?”

“That is what I would like to know...” although confused, Pashir briefly explained what had happened after Orba lost consciousness.

“And Ran?”

No sooner had the mysterious girl kissed Orba, than she had fainted as though her strings had been snapped, and had fallen inert on top of him. Orba had apparently regained consciousness immediately afterwards.

He gently laid her on the ground. Although he could not make any logical analysis of what had happened to him, he could easily guess that Hou Ran had saved him.

“Uwaaaah!”

A man’s shriek was heard, and in the same instant, the surrounding area was engulfed in screams.

Pashir’s expression went tense, and he stepped in front of Orba to shield him. His hand reached for the sword at his waist, but the once undefeated gladiator showed a tinge of fear on his face.

A soldier had been ripped apart lengthwise. The corpse tumbled to the ground, dark red blood streaming out, but the assailant was nowhere to be seen. Taking up defensive stances, the soldiers carefully scanned the surroundings.

“Thirteen.”

Whose whispered voice was that?

This time, it was a soldier standing right in front of Pashir who collapsed forward.

Cries of pain were heard immediately after.

When Pashir looked down, both the of the soldier's feet had been amputated at the ankles. Yet he himself had not realised this, and was attempting to stand up, falling forward again and again as he clawed at the ground.

Pashir and Orba both gasped.

They both saw it. An arm suddenly seemed to stretch out from the soldier's shadow and scythe towards his chest. It tore through his armoured torso as though cutting through paper, and the soldier died amidst pools of blood.

The arm was sucked back into the ground and disappeared from sight.

"Fourteen."

Beyond all doubt, it was Zafar's voice.

The soldiers with seized with frenzy. Those who had witnessed the same scene as Orba and Pashir jabbed their spears deep into the ground. Even supposing there was someone lying hidden there, were those really the actions of sanity?

No... in that sense, Zafar was probably no longer sane either. Orba naturally had no way of knowing it, but the sorcerer had already cut down as many lives as the Mephius' elder had given him permission to, and had greedily devoured the ether from them.

"Fifteen."

Orba could feel the hair on his body stand on end with horror at the sound of that voice. He felt as though he could see that shadow which had been absorbed back into the ground and which was running through it. Moving just like a snake chasing prey, the shadow homed in on Hou Ran, who was still lying unconscious.

Using his sword as a staff, Orba hauled himself to his feet. But his body had yet to catch up with his consciousness, and he collapsed.

The shadow was already drawing up to the nape of Ran's neck. The arm extended out.

Whereupon, there was a flash of steel – Pashir had struck. He too had noticed the shadow, just like Orba had, and had been waiting for the arm to appear. His blow was

like that of a scythe harvesting crops, yet in the next instant, Pashir's sturdy body staggered backwards. The tip of his sword had broken off. The shadow changed its course and now dashed straight towards him.

Pashir forced strength into his numbed leg muscles and jumped back. Yet this fight was unusual enough to make even a man like him misjudge distances. The arm appeared from the ground at an acute angle and cut through his shin guard, giving the impression that Pashir's entire body was stretched out in the air.

By then, Orba had finally managed to stand up. He had, however, lost sight of the shadow. Because the soldiers holding torches were moving about in every direction, he could not visually chase after it.

"Bring me fire," he yelled, but be they Mephian or from Dairan, the soldiers were too terrified of the unknown assassin to listen to him. If this had been, say, Safia, the capital of the Grand Duchy, the reaction would probably have been a little different, but even though this was also Ende, the people of Dairan unfortunately had virtually no opportunity to come in contact with sorcery.

Orba's eyes suddenly stopped at a point on the other side of where the soldiers were running around chaotically.

There was a single Baian. Ran must have ridden it. Even though the area was strewn with blood and flesh, it was paying no attention to that and had its head lowered towards the ground. Only its eyes were squirming left and right.

Faster than intuition formed a thought in his mind, Orba started to run.

"Milbak!"

Being called to like this for the first time, the dragon raised its head with a jerk. Clearly, it recognised its 'name'.

As Orba got closer to it, it now, conversely, lowered itself to the ground. He jumped onto the dragon's back without a second's hesitation.

Instantly, a fiery impulse coursed through him.

The Baian roared once, then kicked at the ground with its thick legs. In a few bounds, it reached Pashir's side. Anyone who didn't know better would believe that the dragon

was about to eat him.

Orba unsheathed the gleaming sword at his waist.

“Move, Pashir!”

It was unclear to what extent Pashir understood what that order was about, but he rolled away from where the Baian landed.

As the dragon’s feet struck the ground, Orba put the sword into an underhand grip and thrust it into the earth’s surface. Once it had pierced through the solid-feeling crust, it found living flesh.

“Gaaah!”

It was almost exactly like spearing a harpoon through the water’s surface, and hauling a large fish into the boat. A living human appeared in a spray of earth and dark red blood.

Even as he was convulsing from where the sword had pierced through him, he gave a wave of his arm. His hand seemed to be enveloped in a flash of black lightning. Orba guessed instinctively that he intended to use it to break the sword’s tip, and quickly pulled back his blade.

“You asked me who I was,” Orba’s steel stood at the ready.

For the first time, he was seeing the old man who called himself Zafar in the flesh. Therefore, Orba had no more reason to fear the enemy. Not when he had steel in his hand and an opponent made of flesh and blood.

“If you want to know that badly, I’ll tell you. I’m...”

Zafar gave a low groan and sprang towards Orba. And as he was leaping, Orba swung his sword.

PART 2

Was it coincidence or not?

At about the same time that Zafar was run through with steel, Emperor Guhl Mephius, clinging to a pillar, somehow managed to stand.

It's useless – a voice whispered.

But not the kind of voice that could be heard with ears. The words were sent directly to his brain, and there was no longer anything to differentiate them from his own thoughts.

What attachment do you still have to this realm?

Hasn't it already denied you entirely? This country and this very world reject you. If you were still steering the helm as we told you, you could have become an emperor whose name would go down in history. Such a pity.

Guhl was drenched in sweat, every muscle in his body was contorting simply from trying to stand, but, breathing raggedly, he finally succeeded in placing his two feet firmly on the ground.

His hand was convulsing as he slipped it into his breast pocket. His fingers came in touch with a hard sensation.

It's useless – the voice repeated once more.

Maybe it had realised what the emperor's intention was.

But go ahead. Shooting my old body won't change anything – it laughed scornfully.

His hand shaking, Emperor Guhl took out a gun.

It had belonged to Simon Rodloom. Just before his death, he had sent it to Guhl. The implication was that – *I could also have shot you with this.*

There had been only one bullet within. Guhl had used it to fire through Simon's phantom.

Just before the audience with the crown prince, the emperor had seemed to think of something, and had likewise gotten a single bullet from a soldier to load into the magazine.

Guhl had pointed the gun at the crown prince during the audience. He had even pulled the trigger. He had known that the one before him was an impostor – that he was not his real son. But even if he had not known that, even if his opponent had brought absolute proof of his identity as his son, the emperor would not have hesitated.

Yet no bullet was fired. The emperor lost. He had lost even at a test of luck that he himself had set up on a whim.

“It’s just as you say,” said Guhl, a large vein pounding at his temple. Simply speaking was causing his wrinkled countenance to tremble from the effort, sweat was falling from his beard, and it looked as though at any moment, his entire face might be torn off.

“I’ve been toppled. You’re right when you say that the country and the world have rejected me.”

Where had he erred?

What would have been right?

“There are no answers. If you take ten people, then you’ll have ten different ideals, and if you take a hundred rulers, you’ll have a hundred different paths to the future.”

He lifted the revolver unsteadily. In front of him was the small body of an old man. Just a vacant shell that had already lost its use as a ‘vessel’.

“But – Sorcerer. Not even a toppled ruler is passive. To become just a small part of the tapestry of history is fine. Turned to ash, my body will become soil, and the blood I shed will be inherited by future generations.”

Guhl Mephius had been determined to become a titan. As a titan, he would have no connection to the feelings of ordinary men.

In the end, however, he too had been no more than human. If there was one clear mistake that he had made, perhaps it was simply that he had not been able to go beyond being the ‘vessel’ of one lone human.

This was the judgement of future historians –

Rather than executing a single person who had opposed him, Guhl should have made an example by executing a hundred people. For example, even though he had ordered the execution of Rogue and Odyne's families, both of whom had gone against him and joined the crown prince's side, he used Simon Rodloom's suicide as an excuse to halt it. Whereas if the emperor had seriously wanted to maintain both his own reign and peace within the country, he should not have stopped it.

Which meant that Guhl was too much of a fool to be a tyrant.

Regardless of future evaluations, at that moment, Guhl keenly felt that he was a single human whose existence was like that of a bubble which, from birth until its disappearance, was carried along in the great stream of time that flowed from beginning to end.

The gun muzzle was raised higher. It passed above the old man's chest, above his head, and then changed its angle.

Guhl!

The voice that echoed inside him was more pleasant to Guhl's ear than the finest musical performance given at the palace.

The muzzle was pointed firmly at the temple of Guhl Mephius' own head.

Something red had started to mix with the sweat that was running along his face. Blood vessels had finally started to break within him.

And with it, it was now the old emperor who was smiling scornfully.

"I won't abandon my fate to anyone. From when I was born to when I die, I will have been the emperor of Mephius himself. Playing with you was amusing. Left alone in the darkness of this world, I might have abandoned the throne long ago. In that sense, the Dragon God's faith, and the way you lot schemed with its teachings, certainly had meaning. For me, that is."

Stop it, Guhl. Stop!

With the elder's voice inside him, and trickling blood plastered over his face, Guhl's

laughter reverberated. Then –

“To the one who will inherit Mephius, the one who will bear responsibility for it... You who raised an invisible sword towards me, is the talent you possess truly that great? I will be watching carefully from the heavens.”

This time as well, there was no hesitation.

With a roar of delight, the bullet which had failed to kill Crown Prince Gil Mephius, pierced through from the emperor’s right temple to the left.

The ruler of Mephius lay in a pool of blood.

Emperor Guhl Mephius breathed his last not on the throne, not among fine silk hangings and gold-leaf screens, not within the protection of gallant spears, but on cold stone and in bleak darkness.

The next second, the elder staggered backwards as though startled, then blinked repeatedly. Having lost his target for invasion, he had returned to his previous vessel. Left alone in the shadows, the old man stared down impassively at the emperor’s remains.

“Impossible...”

He whispered, as emotion gradually returned. This time, it was his face that contorted until it seemed that all of its wrinkles would split open.

“Impossible!”

At that moment, mixed in with the screams that seemed torn from his throat, somebody else’s laughter wafted through the underground of the temple.

“Has it already been settled? I had been intending to play my hand, but for all that he had grown old, he was still an emperor. Let’s show him respect for having finished things with his own hands. Thanks to that, every last piece of your diagram of fate had been destroyed.”

“What!”

The voice sounded neither young nor old, and the elder turned to behold its owner.

Who had no physical substance.

It was a semi-transparent illusion created through sorcery. Although he was better placed than anyone to be able to comprehend what he saw, the elder was still evidently shaken by this sudden apparition.

“There are supposed to be double or triple-layer barriers. How could someone other than my own subordinates have sent their ‘shadow’ in...”

“Oh my, having only just regained that body, have your eyes and senses gone dull? To not even be able to see through me... Since you just said that the barrier is ineffective against those who are close to you, there is no reason why I shouldn’t be able to slip in. Isn’t that right? Since I’m none other than one who inherited your blood.”

“So it’s *you*, is it...” the elder growled. His swarthy face darkened with hatred.

“You shouldn’t pull such a face. Not at our first ‘father and son’ reunion in several decades, or even in several centuries.”

“Shut up. If you’re calling yourself my son, then why are you getting in my way? I take it that you were the one pulling the strings behind that impostor of a crown prince.”

“I can’t claim that I was pulling his strings. I simply gave him an opportunity. In imitation of you, I wanted to try working out my own diagram of fate.”

The illusion laughed. Even from close up, it was hard to distinguish who this was, since the face changed round and round every time he spoke. It was as though he was switching from one mask to another.

“With your half-completed diagram of fate right before you, you weren’t in any position to make any direct moves. Since you were afraid that if your intervention went badly, then the ‘diagram’ itself might collapse, right? Which is why you couldn’t interfere, even when a corner of it was cut off. In this case too. *Alas*, Guhl is dead, and the crown prince has survived. Even though the opposite was originally supposed to have happened at a much earlier stage, right? I was constantly manipulating pieces and stars in the background to create an opportunity for you to get impatient and personally take action.”

“Why?” the elder asked in a half-gasp. “Why are you standing in my way? Is it because of *that* blood flowing through you?”

“Father, it’s not like I don’t understand your ambition. After all, the ultimate goal of sorcery is to gain control of every phenomenon that occurs in this world, to take command of the fates of humans, and to take charge of this world. In your case, you held those ideals and goals before sorcery, when you devoted yourself entirely to the study of ‘science’. And then, when you stepped down onto this planet, you became entranced with sorcery, which displayed power that not even science could achieve; and with that power, you aimed to become greater even than the Dragon Gods. I get it. I get it, but...”

Among the faces that the illusion wore were those of Herman, the sorcerer who had served Fedom, as well as Hezel, who had once belonged to Ende’s Bureau of Sorcery and was supposed to be with the former first prince, Jeremie.

“That’s boring.”

“Boring?”

“I was born for your ambition. Despite that, or rather, because of that, I came to want to oppose it. When you created a sorceress from the data obtained, both from the dragon maiden you had taken from Barbaroi and from her son – me, in other words, when you created an artificial ‘barbarian’, I performed an experiment of my own.”

“...”

“O aloof king, first sorcerer of this world. O elder of Mephius, and Garda in the western lands. If you desire the ultimate sorcery, I will desire the same thing. If you wish to replace this world with your own, I will create a world that you do not want. If you declare that you will surpass the Dragon Gods, I will, without fail, carry out the Dragon God’s last wish, and inherit this planet.”

“Damn you....”

“Do not forget this. There, in that land, the Dragon Gods await the time of their revival. Most of the gods are dead, and have lost their intelligence through failed experiments; but in that place alone, they will certainly achieve results. What will happen to this world when they are reborn and raise their first cry? Humans have yet to achieve unification. And ether is dying out. Yet those who hold the key are neither you nor I... Right, I believe that it might be those insignificant humans who repeat their foolish wars and who still weave the same ‘history’ as during the Earth era. Against all expectations, it might be humans who hold it.”

At the same moment as those words ended, the illusion vanished abruptly.

It did not even leave an after image.

And the elder knew why.

The sound of loud footsteps drew closer.

“Your Majesty,” the soldier who had called out stared in shock for a moment at the scene that was spread out before him.

There was no one else there.

The only thing there was a corpse, lying in a pool of dark blood, and covered in more of its own gore. The soldier stared and drew in a sharp breath. The spear he had been holding clattered to the floor, the sound echoing ominously.

“Your Majesty... Your Imperial Majesty!”

The soldier rushed up to the corpse and was about to crouch beside it, but suddenly stopped, frozen in an unnatural posture. He had felt the presence of something behind him. Yet he was not able to turn around to check what it was.

A red line ran around his neck. Once it had finished drawing a perfect circle around it, the soldier’s head drooped down. From exactly where the line was, it fell from his neck and, with a thump, rolled across the floor, while his body remained standing. The next second, a spray of blood erupted.

“Can we not even stall for time?” so saying, the shadow hovering behind the soldier promptly vanished, and, the next moment, the elder of the Dragon Gods’ faith had moved elsewhere.

A room with a long crystal table. It was here that the elders and used to hold meetings every night. The elder was practically unconscious as he stretched out his fingers to touch the torches hanging against the wall.

A hazy flame leaped up.

For a moment, in the wavering shadow, the elder’s face looked like a skull. There was no trace of emotion within his sunken eye sockets. No regret, nor anger, nor sadness.

He touched the top of the table with his bony fingers. If it had been before, then just as with the torches, as soon as his fingers had brushed against it, the sight of something like constellations would have floated up. However, that strange board on which each of those pale points of light recorded a person's fate no longer projected anything.

"That... is to be expected," the elder muttered in a voice as dry as bone. "I shaped that figure for Mephius. At its centre was the one who could exercise the greatest influence on the country – Guhl Mephius. Which means that if Guhl's light went out, the lights of those he influenced directly would also vanish, and the light of the stars that those persons guided would also be snuffed out. Inevitably, no one's fate is held at hand any longer. Such a long, a very long time, and those territories great and small were finally on the verge of being complete... Right, to borrow the emperor's words, it's similar to when a child's sandbox, after the castles and landscapes created by them from the mud and sand, have been trampled over by adults."

The elder's smile was terribly hollow. Lurking within was what might be exhaustion from a passage of time that would be unfathomable to others.

Is it over? A voice that was not even a mutter escaped from him.

After transferring bodies so many times, after weaving history... Is this where it ends? Is this where I will be defeated? I wished to escape from this absurd design, in which people govern and rule over other people. My wish, my dreams, my ideals to consign the hundreds of emperors, the thousands of kings, to relics of the past, to organise a new rule, to create a perfect 'system of humanity' – is this where they...

Just then – from the corner of his eye, he saw a pale light burning.

The elder fiercely turned to look in that direction. But it was only the table. It was just a flash from the reflection of the torches' flames on the crystal surface. The elder felt like scoffing at himself.

Nonetheless, at that time, his eyes had reflected a pale light. He was not mistaken. The elder, who had once guided Mephius from the shadows, forgot all about that power and dignity, and practically crawled on his belly to stare at that light.

It was small.

A faint, fleeting light, that looked as though it would disappear with a single puff of

breath. Even so, it seemed to be clinging to this world, desperately calling attention to its existence.

“That’s...”

While the elder’s murky, yellowish-looking eyes continued to reflect that light, blue will-o-the-wisps seemed to light up within them.

PART 3

As per Ineli's words, a messenger left at noon for the temple.

There was no reply. Nor did the messenger return.

However, that night –

Because of the black clouds that had been enclosing the heavens since evening, the night was so dark that nothing could be seen, even at a short distance; it was only around the temple, where there were fires kindled by the soldiers, that it was light as day.

The messenger returned. Perhaps he had been kept waiting for a long time, or perhaps he had gone through a fierce and heated argument, but he was in a state of utter exhaustion when he arrived, tottering unsteadily, before the imperial princess.

“Empress Melissa appears to be willing to meet with Princess Vileena, who has come from Garbera. She stated that as things have reached this point, she will explain why she has justice on her side, and that she wishes to receive the support of our good neighbour, Garbera,” he quietly reported.

The soldiers were, of course, unaware of this exchange. However, what had been weighing on them the most was not knowing when this would all be over, and the siege war had been threatening to wear down their spirits; so at the hint of some kind of development, the orderly line of fires wavered and shook for a second, as though from a strong wind.

The empress had appointed the time before dawn for the meeting. An action that urged them to speed after having kept them waiting for so long. It was obviously a way of taking control of the pace of things.

Hearing the report, Ineli bit her lips, but she had no choice but to comply.

An hour or so passed by.

Ineli Mephius appeared once more on the open square before the temple. She was wearing a white cloak and informal armour, which she had made for ceremonial use. Perhaps because they had heard rumours, although it was late at night, people were

gathering, forming a shadowy circle beyond the soldiers.

Amidst the faint commotion coming from them that was carried on the wind, the princess walked up to the doctors and ladies' maids who had been summoned beforehand. Among the maids was the Garberan princess, her face concealed beneath a veil.

"Well then, Elder Sister..." Ineli surreptitiously called out to the royal princess. "I beg you to be careful. Your first concern needs to be for your own safety."

"I'm much obliged to you, Your Imperial Highness. Not only for listening to my selfish request, but also for your kind words."

Odyne, who was going also, was the target of their rather scripted conversation. He too had some grasp of the situation; or at the very least, of what they were aiming for.

Still... Odyne, having been left in charge of Solon, had very little expectation that this would get the situation moving. At best, it might buy some time before Empress Melissa, who currently had limited means of action, did something drastic.

As the princesses had said, it was hard to imagine that the empress, who claimed righteousness, would harm royalty from an allied country. Nevertheless, as unlikely as the risk was, Odyne was aware that it existed.

Walt had also come running as soon as he heard about it. To be honest, he and Odyne had so far had little interaction, but facing the same situation like this made him hopeful in various ways.

"Keep a close watch on her Imperial Highness," Odyne whispered in his ear. "Given the plans made, I don't think that she'll act rashly, but she's still a very young lady. If, by any chance..."

"I'll stop her whatever it takes," was Walt's immediate reply.

He had temporarily been placed in charged of a hundred of the general's men.

A loud commotion arose from the townspeople. With Odyne in the lead, the doctors and the ladies' maids, who were holding food aloft, headed towards the inside of the temple.

The stars that were twinkling overhead shone down with their faint light.

In a hall on the ground floor of the temple, Empress Melissa, Zaas Sidious, the former leader of the Spear of Flames Division, Oubary Bilan, similarly a former general, and Imperial Princess Flora Mephius were all aligned.

The number of soldiers that Zaas and Oubary led did not reach two hundred. There had been twice as many when they had first barricaded themselves in the temple, but after only a few days of siege, many had judged that the tides of war were unfavourable, and had escaped. It was clear that their numbers would only increase as the days went by.

They had mostly spent their time here in silence.

Zaas' excitable young blood seemed to find it intolerable, and time and again he would summon the men to spar with him at sword fighting.

Oubary had already consumed eighty percent of the alcohol they had brought in. Although irritation occasionally flashed through his liquor-dulled eyes, he did not openly say anything.

It was then that the messenger had come from outside. Had he come to advise them to surrender, Zaas would probably have cut him up and tossed out in pieces, but he instead brought an unexpected offer.

"The Garberan princess want to meet with me?"

For Melissa, this was someone that she had tried to kill more than once. That was because, due to an elder's prediction, she had been convinced that this Garberan princess would destroy her future, as well as that of the child in her womb. By this time, though, had the empress realised? That perhaps the 'young girl who casts a dark shadow over the imperial throne promised to this future child' from the prediction might not have been Vileena Owell, but Melissa's own daughter instead. Whatever the case, the hatred and revulsion that had once dwelt in her heart would probably not disappear so easily, and a contemptuous smile appeared on the empress' haggard face.

"It might be some kind of trap," said Zaas, gripping the pommel of his sword.

Truth be told, he was gripped with the desire to send the messenger's head flying. Melissa, however, assessed the situation a little longer.

"Let's meet her," she declared, after deliberately keeping the messenger waiting for a long time, "she will be the best person to amuse us in our boredom. What kind of tales will she entertain us with about the impostor crown prince, the very same one who tore Mephius in two? I look forward to it."

As the empress laughed, it was impossible to tell from her expression how much hope, if any, she found in the future.

A short while elapsed.

The fires flickered in the iron braziers placed in advance along the hall wall. Their red colour reflecting on their armour, an armed group entered the room.

Odyne was at their head. To the right and left of him were some of Zaas' soldiers, holding guns.

First, the ladies' maids handed over the food, looking frightened.

The astonished soldiers with their somewhat grubby faces looked towards Zaas and Oubary. Zaas scowled, but Oubary gave a generous wave of his hand.

"Share it among the soldiers."

Speechless delight appearing on their faces, the men grabbed at it, dividing each portion.

"Odyne." Melissa glared viciously at the general in the lead. "How dare you show up here so shamelessly, despite owing such a huge debt to His Majesty?"

"It is true that I pledged my loyalty to His Majesty," Odyne sketched a small bow. "That being so, where is His Majesty right now?"

"His health is poor and he is resting. And you, the treacherous retainer, are the one who injured him. You, and also..."

Melissa sent a glare as fierce as flames to the one lady's maid who had yet to remove her veil. And who was, of course, Princess Vileena Owell.

“And also, the Garberan princess over there. Can you not even tell the difference between your own fiancé and an impostor?”

“Empress, I do not know what you mean,” Vileena also bowed.

With gun muzzles gleaming on either side of her, her manner was almost infuriatingly calm. Melissa apparently could not stand it.

“If you persist until the end in endangering our realm by supporting a rebel who plots to capture it, then for all that you may be the princess of an allied country, we will not simply send you back. Are you prepared for that, Princess?”

Her normally beautiful, girlish face, reputed for how it made her look like a sister to her daughter Ineli, twisted like a poisonous snake.

Her eyes slightly lowered, the princess replied to her.

“I came from Garbera to marry the crown prince. Nothing more, nothing less. It is terrible to hear talk of plotting to capture the realm.”

“Who can say what Garbera’s true intentions are.”

“Garbera, my native country, hopes for long-lasting peace with Mephius. That is why I punished that fool, Salamand. I do not know who has been propagating the story that Crown Prince Gil has joined hands with Garbera to overturn the country, but it is perfect nonsense. Who will rule the country in the next era is something that His Majesty, Emperor Guhl Mephius, will decide himself, is it not?”

Opposite her, Melissa did not hide how she ground her teeth.

“How dare you speak that way? Coming back from the dead? Anyone can tell you how, on the strength of a claim that anyone can tell is false, that man seized Mephius’ capital by brute force, and with brute force turned his blade against His Majesty the Emperor and seized the throne.”



“He did not come back from the dead. His Imperial Highness the crown prince had to feign his own death because he was worried about the country’s future. Do you believe that he would willingly raise a sword against the people of Mephius? Do you believe that he felt nothing at the sight of corpses piling up on the battlefield, and each of them Mephian? That it was not a bitter decision? He was always, constantly, forcing himself to follow through with his purpose.

Vileena’s tone was impassioned. It was as though, within this hall, only Melissa and Vileena had hot blood running through them. The soldiers were lined up like bronze statues put on display for the viewing pleasure of visitors, while as for Flora, who could only tremble violently, or Zaas, Oubary and Odyne – the princess’ companion – all three of them armed with swords, they remained as still as though their feet had been sewn together, and they did not utter a word.

“Empress, let’s go together from this gloomy shrine and out to where the sun shines. What has happened until now has been no more than the result of an accumulation of small misunderstandings. So that fellow Mephians no longer need shed their blood, please, take my hand and let us go before the people. His Highness the crown prince will soon return to Solon, after which, father and son can talk leisurely together, so that their differences will soon be solved and...”

“Don’t come any closer!” Melissa barked as Vileena, perhaps without even realising it, had taken a step towards her. The soldiers from both sides were surprised and shakily raised their weapons just as the Garberan princess stopped.

“Father and son? Are you talking about that crown prince?” Melissa’s expression was the same as though a snake or some other creature without emotion was imitating humans and fixing a smile on their face. And then –

“*Disgusting*,” she almost spat out the word. Or rather, saliva literally spewed from her lips. “Garberan princess, you don’t know. That man is not Gil Mephius. He isn’t royalty, he isn’t even nobility. The day His Majesty confronted that man face-to-face, he ordered him to ‘show his back’. That man made use of lies and refused to do so to the end. Do you happen to understand the meaning, O wise princess?” “...” “That man is a *slave*.”

Melissa’s voice was like a sudden thunderclap reverberating on a clear day.

“With a slave brand seared into his back, he is part of the vilest class in this world. Did

you not know it, Princess Vileena? Or no, did you deliberately call him the crown prince to use that to Garbera's advantage?"

"Empress."

"Talk together with the likes of a slave? Act as father and son to protect the country? Oh, horrible. Just thinking about it makes me shudder in disgust..." whereupon, the empress' plump lips curved into a smile. "What about it, Garberan princess?"

"What do you mean by 'what about it'?" Vileena asked carefully.

"Will you call *that* 'Crown Prince'? Do you intend to marry *that* and have it sit on Mephius' throne? Then, that slave from who knows where, who has rummaged through who knows what piles of garbage, who has been whipped by his master who knows how many times – do you intend to invite that slave to share your bed? Will a daughter of Garbera's proud royal family allow a man who is no more than livestock to touch her skin?"

Vileena's fair skin suddenly flushed red. For a moment, a feeling that was neither embarrassment nor anger seemed to seize hold of the girl who was only in her mid-teens.

"Oh, that's right," Melissa gave a loud, gloating laugh, "that would be the best way of proving that man's origins, since he claims to be the crown prince. If you want to drag me out of here, summon *that* immediately. Then have sex in front of me. If you do so, I will acknowledge him as a perfectly genuine crown prince, and we can leave the temple together."

With Melissa's high-pitched laughter trailed along, coiling around Vileena like wind as she turned her back on the empress. The top of her neck was flushed red, and she bit her lips, her head bowed.

The soldiers who were on the empress' side laughed coarsely.

There was no reasoned argument to be made.

Humph – Watching the exchange, Zaas Sidious sneered inwardly.

He who had faced Gil Mephius first-hand on the battlefield had his own reasons for asserting that the current crown prince was an impostor. No matter what flowery

words were used or how finely the figure was dressed up, his deep-rooted warrior's instinct would not be deceived. When he had heard that the Garberan princess would pay a visit here, he had seen it as nothing but a farce.

If you really want to earn my acceptance – then rather than a little girl from a foreign country, the Impostor Crown Prince should have come in person and crossed swords with him.

“If you say that person is an impostor,” Vileena spoke in voice so soft it seemed to crawl across the ground. Driven into a corner, unable to accept her defeat, the girl presented a foolish figure as she fought vainly and with empty hands. Yet the next second –

“Then as you say, I will share a pillow with an impostor. I will call a slave the emperor of Mephius.”

At her pointed, unflinching words, Zaas and Melissa's scornful smiles froze

“What?”

“I am not a god, so, from the very start, I have never had a way of verifying a person's lineage. I cannot see through all parts of a person's past. For example, if some unknown young man were to appear here and claim that ‘I am from such-and-such royal family from such-and-such country’, how could I tell just from looking at him whether what he said was true or false?”

Vileena slowly raised her head and as she did so, her shining hair parted to either side, clearly revealing her expression.

Right.

She was smiling.

Vileena Owell was smiling faintly.

“If my ‘eyes’ can recognise anything, then that is the time that we spent together. Seeing a person with your own eyes, hearing them with your own ears, spending time next to them – does that not lead to ‘looking’ at them. By definition, I never knew His Imperial Highness Gil Mephius before meeting him. Which means that the Prince Gil that I know is the one that I spent time with.”

Her hair fluttered again, and Vileena once more stood face-to-face with Melissa.

“Having no way to verifying lineage, and no eyes to see the past, I, who am but a mere human, can only judge on the basis of that time spent together. And on that basis, I recognise him as a truly proud ruler, and with that belief, I will welcome him as my husband.”

Right, that's right.

For every thousand questions that rose to her mind, ten thousand convictions drowned them out. Rather than being aimed at Melissa, these were probably words that she was more than half saying to herself.

Vileena was prouder than anyone of being part of Garbera's royal family. She was prouder than anything of having inherited the blood of her great ancestors, of her grandfather and of her father, or in other words, of housing within her the royal family's history; and because of that, she was stricter on herself than anyone.

So it was impossible for her to say that *lineage has no importance*.

At the same time however, she could not assert that *therefore, that person himself has no importance*.

After all...

I know him.

Vileena's smile deepened. Melissa, Zaas and the soldiers who were watching speechlessly had the impression that a hole had opened in the ceiling, through shone a single shaft of light. That was how brightly the princess' eyes were shining. Yet it was not at anyone in this room that she was looking.

Well now, truly childish.

The young man had loudly heaped similar abuse on himself.

He looks like he's only interested in his own concerns.

The young man would sit through councils of war in silence, his arms crossed. Yet once he was on the battlefield, he moved with such violent force that it seemed that all

hesitation had been wiped away.

A person who can see all around the wide battlefield, yet still be tripped up by an unseen pebble at his feet.

Strong enough to remain calm and not shy away even from cruel means, yet with a part to him that is unspeakably fragile and weak.

The young man had fallen to his knees in the dusk. He had drowned himself in alcohol and been rebuked by his subordinates.

Pompous and smug, slippery, not allowing anyone into his heart.

Just as though he was hiding his real face behind an iron mask.

The young man –

Had searched.

Has thirsted.

Had screamed.

Had cried.

Say one could see through that iron wall, then there would be far fewer irritating and winding paths than expected, as he was not one to directly speak about himself.

And now she was wondering why it had taken her so long to notice.

The iron mask had been transparent from the very start.

After all, he himself had torn half of it off with his own hands.

“I wish to be by his side.”

“...”

“At his side, I wish to see the future that he will build for Mephius. No... I wish to help build it. I, Vileena Owell, third princess of the Kingdom of Garbera, have that wish

towards him. What does it matter that he may be a slave?"

If, she silently called out in her mind, if you really are a slave, then you should be proud of it.

You are a light to the future for a princess. Not just for me, but rather for the entire country of Mephius, and for the whole world that country is part of.

"Empress Melissa. Won't you please, with His Majesty the Emperor, behold that future with your own eyes? If he makes a mistake because of his youth, can you not help correct it? For all the people living in Mephius."

Vileena Owell stretched out her fair white hand.

CHAPTER 7

IRON MASK

PART 1

An impostor.

A slave.

During the exchange between Empress Melissa and the Garberan princess, Oubary Bilan's eyes suddenly lit up with life. Inversely proportionate to that, his complexion grew paler and his four limbs started to tremble.

Yeah, that's right. That guy's an impostor. He's a slave who dressed himself up in the crown prince's skin.

The pale gleam of Gil Mephius' eyes flashed through Oubary's mind. When he remembered the pure, undiluted bloodthirst emanating from them, Oubary's skin rose in goosebumps.

"You should stop there."

A figure appeared in the hall to the accompaniment of the sound from their own footsteps. Oubary Bilan snapped back to himself, but that person – the elder, who was being supported on either side as he walked – had not been calling out to him.

He had been addressing Melissa.

For both Vileena and Melissa, this was an unexpected visitor, however, the elder continued –

"We have long lost the leeway to waste time on words. Hurry, Melissa."

"What is it that you mean?"

"Emperor Guhl is dead."

At those words, there wasn't anybody there who didn't wonder if they had misheard. After a beat –

“What... what was it that you said?” Melissa's face as she asked that had lost all expression, and was like that of a little girl.

“The emperor is dead,” repeated the elder. “But he died earlier than I had predicted... since the man who was to be at the centre of the diagram of fate has fallen, I no longer have any business in Solon. I must leave to build up my power in a new land.”

“That...”

In the blink of an eye, the flush of emotion returned to Melissa's face. Perhaps the speed and force of it was too much for her herself, as, dumbfounded, she blankly opened and shut her lips.

“His Majesty is dead? You are leaving Solon? That is... t-that is...” she could say nothing further.

Amidst the soldiers who, allies and enemy alike, had broken out into a din, Vileena was also dazed.

His Majesty Guhl... has passed away?

It was too sudden to be believed. Or rather, she did not want to believe it.

He was certainly not someone towards whom she held kind feelings. Since she had decided to become Gil Mephius' wife, he was an 'enemy' who would unavoidably need to be confronted. And yet...

“I would like to be given the honour of naming my grandchild.” – the emperor's face when he had thus addressed her flickered through her mind.

“Guhl Mephius never goes back on his promises, even if they are made with women or children.” – With those words, the old man had readily assented to the princess' request, even though he seemed unlikely to gain anything from it. And also –

“People gather around a strong sword,” the old emperor next to Vileena had whispered as he looked down at the gladiator tournament. “Because they believe they are protected by a strong sword, they are able to pass their days peacefully... Well,

peace with Garbera has been established at long last. Next year, instead of just 'savage' gladiators, I anticipate being able to invite airship pilots from Garbera to put on a racing contest. I hope to receive the princess' assistance on its occasion"

"Bullshit!"

The young general, Zaas Sidious, suddenly interrupted the princess' reminiscences. He draw his sword from at his waist.

"His Majesty has passed away? Don't talk crap. No... if turns out to be true, wouldn't it be your doing, you bastard and your bunch of heathens?" with a roar, he strode towards the elder.

As a frank young man, he had never looked favourably on the Dragon Gods' faith, which had abruptly encroached all the way to the heart of Mephius. He and his family had inherited their pride from the boast that Mephius had been built by warriors fighting like warriors.

"Take me to His Majesty right now! If you don't, I might just slice the head off the withered old stump that you call your body..."

When he had approached to within a distance of a few steps, the elder gave one lengthwise wave of his arm. Although it was a feeble gesture of resistance, too weak to even raise a breeze, Zaas did not mock him for it.

Or rather, he sank to his knees on the spot with a look of anguish. An agonised moan escaped from his lips even as he ground his teeth together. His face turned red, and veins throbbed in his large neck.

Crying out in panic, the soldiers all simultaneously backed away. Some clung to one another, not caring whether they were friend or foe. While Zaas writhed in torment, something like blue lightning seemed to sizzle from him, and the strange sorcery had scared them all out of their wits.

"Know your place, Boy."

The elder's own face was also twisted in pain. Neither Vileena nor Odyne, who could only stare at the situation in blank amazement, understood what was going on, but his body must have been reaching the limit of using his 'power'.

However, mustering what seemed to be the last of his strength, the elder stretched his hand out towards Melissa. The empress' face went pale for a second, perhaps because she expected to suffer the same fate as Zaas.

"You should take my hand, Empress," said the elder, breathing raggedly. "Take my hand and come with me. This is the new future indicated by the diagram of fate."

"A-And then...." Melissa's chest heaved up and down, "...and then, what will happen? His Majesty has died, and after leaving Mephius, what will happen? What about me, no, what about the baby in my belly? My child whom you predicted would rule, not just Mephius, but all under heaven?"

"It is precisely for the child's sake, Melissa," the elder's heavy eyelids seemed like they would shut at any moment, and he appeared to be keeping them open by sheer force of will. "There was only one remaining light on board the fate whose golden mean had collapsed. In other words, there is only one remaining hope on which to build the future dreamed of in both our ideals. And that is the child that dwells in your womb."

"..."

"Come, Empress. You should not take the princess' hand, but mine instead. Only I can ensure that your child will walk the path of the supreme ruler."

"You mustn't!"

Did Vileena call out so suddenly because she had instinctively recognised the signs of evil emanating from the old man?

The empress, however, stretched out her hand and placed it on top of the elder's palm. In that instant, her head drooped, all the strength sucked from her, and she looked as though she was being held up by the elder, who was supporting the apparently unconscious Melissa with one thin arm.

"We'll need a knight to protect the lady. Zaas was it... Boy, you're coming too."

With just those few words, he made Zaas, who had been writhing in agony, stand up, and handed him the empress to hold in both arms. It looked exactly the same as him pulling the strings of a puppet.

"W-Wait!"

A little late, Odyne shouted out to stop him. He turned to his men. "Seize him. He intends to kidnap the empress," he yelled.

The soldiers also came back to their senses, and although they had just been frozen like bronze statues, it was as though energy had suddenly returned to their limbs. With swarthy, muscular arms, they drew their swords and readied their guns.

The gleam of their drawn blades surrounded the old man but, at that moment, the elder closed his eyes and, grunting with exertion, extended both arms towards them.

"Uwaah!"

The soldiers in the lead hurriedly jumped back. Blue lightning had struck the ground right in front of them.

Black smoke rose from the stone floor.

If one were to look up, they would, of course, see no black clouds overhead, but only the high ceiling. Yet even so, bolt after bolt of lightning rained down, and for a moment, their pallid light seemed to meld together, and bring forth an electric dragon. Seeing that dragon bar their way, the soldiers either dropped their swords and fled, or else stumbled about, neither advancing nor retreating.

Confronted with the tricks of sorcery for the first time in his life, General Odyne gaped, unable to call out encouragement to the soldiers.

Vileena tried to run to recover the empress, but the incessant bolts of lightning likewise prevented her from moving forward.

Then –

"Gallant Princess," came a voice deathly enough to make her shudder, "I'll give up for now. On this country's land and people, and on the crown prince who will no doubt soon be celebrating victory. But remember this. Kingdoms ruled by humans, and history woven by humans are fleeting and insignificant. I will definitely return. To bring forth a new reality in this land."

There was no way for Vileena to have words to answer him with. She barely even understood anything about this old man's background. However, perhaps because such was her personality, his overbearing words provoked her to indignation.

“Then we’ll be waiting, Sorcerer,” Vileena Owell bit her lip. “A country, a history and a world not created by humans? I look forward to actual proof of that pleasant dream. Since, alas, we can only crawl on the ground, we’ll be gritting our teeth and weaving our insignificant history with our human hands and blood that we shed, while waiting for this future of which you speak.”

For a moment, the elder’s expression twisted with hatred, but he said nothing further and, on the other side of the bolts of light that were pouring down, he, Melissa, Zaas, and several other old men all disappeared from sight.

PART 2

Mother...

During that time, there was a small figure, unable to make a sound, who seemed to have been swallowed up by the temple's shadows.

Flora Mephius.

A little girl so tiny and with so little presence that nobody there paid her the slightest attention.

Her mother had dragged her to the temple half by force, yet now, her mother had vanished with the elder.

The pale lightning came to a stop, no doubt because its master had left.

Odyne sent his men to give chase. At the same time, he chose one of them to act as messenger and run to the entrance of the temple.

"Since this place is surrounded and under siege, I don't see how they can escape, but there might be some kind of secret passage that only they know about. Inform Lady Ineli and get reinforcements here..."

Men shouting, rallying cries, the sound of rough footsteps along the floor...

The stream of events flowed on either side of her, leaving Flora behind, all alone. It had been the same back then. After the crown prince had left for Ende, and Solon had been struck with turmoil, she had likewise been isolated and friendless within the palace.

All these affairs were unconnected to her, and the noise they created swelled up, flowed by, then vanished.

Her mother had disappeared into the shadows beyond the light, yet Flora did not feel sad about it. Nor about the death of her step-father, Emperor Guhl.

Perhaps it was because the quick succession of events had numbed her childish heart, which was young even for her age, but she had come to understand something. *Mother*

doesn't feel any connection to me – she accepted it with resignation. She had done so from the moment that she had been made to realise that even the memory of her late father was gone from her mother's mind.

Amidst the echoes of the men's booming voices, Flora also prepared to start walking. At any rate, she did not belong here, in this place where neither her mother nor her father were. Yet even in that case, when she asked herself where it was that she should go, Flora could find no answer. Her older sister, whom she had never stopped loving and admiring, was also distant. Her sister was now so far away that, even if she looked back from where she was, she would see no trace of the past in which she had enjoyed the same picture books and played with the same dolls as her, while Flora herself did not know what made her sister happy, or sad, or angry.

Her head bowed down, Flora firmly took one small step. Which was when –

“Where you going?”

Someone came trampling into her space, where she had not expected anyone to interfere. Someone who was releasing a lot of heat and a beastlike body odour.

The man caught her shoulders and held them from behind her back with suffocating strength. “Princess Flora!” Vileena cried out, having apparently just noticed what was happening.

The man who had prevented the imperial princess from moving forward was, in a sense, in a similar situation to Flora's. He had come to this dismal place at the empress' request, but in the end, he had accomplished nothing and had miserably been left behind.

Oubary Bilan, one-time commander of the former Black Armoured Division.

He drew the wide sword that was at his belt, and brandished it in front of Flora's eyes.

“The empress and the elders have gone but I... I'm the only one who won't be deceived. I'm the only one who won't give in to the Impostor Crown Prince!” he shouted, spittle spewing in large quantities. “She's a hostage. Bring the lying fool who says he's Gil Mephius to me right now! I'll show you all what his real identity is!”

Oubary manoeuvred himself into a corner of the temple, his back against the wall, using the trembling girl whose eyes were starting as far as they could as a shield.

There were still several soldiers, Odyne included, within the hall. The general of the Silver Axe Division was about to give his men his orders, but –

“Don’t move!” Oubary shouted, placing his sword to Flora’s neck.

As the little girl gave a high-pitched scream, the soldiers feet froze in place.

“Please stop this,” Vileena called out loudly, also pausing from where she had been stepping forward. “What is the point of further fighting? Release the imperial princess immediately.”

“Silence, you damned Garberan viper,” Oubary spat a gob of saliva.

Although his bloodshot eyes were very much those of a man who had lost touch with reality, they were also the eyes of a warrior who had not yet given up hope even in the face of certain death. In actual fact, his sense of reason had already vanished during his confinement in Solon. Compared to then, although Oubary’s sanity was lost, he had regained his commander-like spirit.

“While you lot were all going to continue putting on your stupid play, only the truth can’t be twisted. You heard it, right? His Majesty is dead. All of Mephius has already as good as gone up in flames. That slave is the cause of every mistake. Let me kill him. No... I have to kill him. On my honour as general of the Black Armoured Division!”

The sword that Oubary held up was tied with cloth to his right hand. In the past, he had wielded his sword as freely as though it had been a part of his own body, but now, he could not even hold it in his hand. Oubary Bilan was, indeed, a warrior. How he crossed battlefields and killed enemies was how the value of his existence was measured, and how he had obtained his status within Mephius. Having now been reduced to this, he had not thought to cling to that status.

However, at the very least...

At the very least, as a warrior of Mephius, there was one last task that he had to accomplish; and he believed that with a fervour that allowed him to overcome his wounds, the pain of his damaged pride, and his fear.

Perhaps it was simply a desire for revenge. Perhaps it was a half-despairing feeling, now that his own future was plunged in darkness, that he had to snatch away the future of the one who had made him fall so low. However, his thoughts were partly

occupied by his pride as a Mephian warrior who was contributing to support his country. He was confident in himself. And he had justice on his side, as he could not let his country continue down the wrong path.

Yes, this was justice. Although loyalty and righteousness might seem to have fixed forms, in reality, they were moulded to the shapes and expectations of each individual person. At this moment, it was clear that Oubary Bilan's chest was filled with pride.

Therefore, as he stepped forward, Odyne said –

“Don't be hasty, General Oubary. Although you talk about being concerned for this country's future, you are holding a sword to the imperial princess' neck. So what kind of justice can you be upholding?”

Yet in this situation, Oubary was calm enough to return a roar of laughter.

“Imperial princess? Do you guys still see her as that? Well, she makes a good hostage simply because you do see it that way, but still...”

His implied meaning was that now that the emperor was dead and that the empress had disappeared, Flora, who was no more than a child of Melissa's first marriage, no longer qualified as a member of the imperial family. Since Oubary was proclaiming the justice of killing the impostor crown prince, he had no reason to kneel before Flora, who had no legitimate connection to the imperial bloodline.

“Now then, what will you do? General of the Silver Axe Division?” Oubary's lips, which were so surprisingly thin on a man with his build and face, twisted into a smile. “Don't bother with a pointless exchange of words. If you're planning to play for time, then this 'imperial princess' might just kick the bucket before you know it. Hurry up and get the crown prince here.”

“His Highness the Crown Prince is not here. He is in Ende and...”

“Then get him here by force!” the sword shook to the rhythm of Oubary's howls. “Or how about preparing another impostor and dragging him here? But I don't mind, go ahead. I'll just cut down every last one of them!”

Tears trickled from Flora's eyes. Her mother, her sister, her father also were not here, and she was being harshly taught that she was nothing but a small, worthless little girl with not a single place where she belonged.

Then –

“I thought I told you not to come any closer,” Oubary glared at the Garberan princess, who once more halted her steps.

This time, however, Vileena answered him.

“How pitiful. A brave Mephian commander seems to be terrified of unarmed women and children.”

“What?”

“Just as you said, that young lady is no longer of any use as a hostage. In order to avoid foolishly prolonging this turmoil, there would be nothing surprising if we decided to shoot you down, even with Lady Flora beside you. And if that fact is not publicly announced, why then, you, Oubary Bilan, will be known for having murdered her in a fit of madness.”

As Odyne blanched involuntarily, Vileena edged another step closer to Oubary.

Opposite her, the commander of the former Black Armoured Division could not conceal his dismay. What would happen if the royal princess gave the order, here and now, to shoot? His life was undoubtedly at risk, but more than that, he, who had been intending to protect the country, would see his honour and his position fall even lower than that of a slave, and history would remember him in infamy. As a man who wished to struggle to the end as a warrior, that thought terrified him.

“Therefore, General Oubary, please release that girl who is no longer of any use to you as a shield.”

“Don’t be stupid. Do you think that you can wheedle me like that, little brat?”

“I may be stupid and I may be a little brat,” said the princess. “But I am a more valuable hostage than she is. After all, I am Vileena Owell, princess of Garbera.”

“What?”

“I am suggesting that you take me as your hostage, Oubary Bilan.”

For a second, everyone was left speechless. Deeper within the temple, Odyne’s

subordinates were running around, searching for the elders, and their rough footsteps were echoing.

As though she had been waiting for a pause in the noise, Vileena took another step forward.

“Don’t come here!”

“Sir Hero, please, let Lady Flora go. On my name as a princess of Garbera, I will neither run nor hide.”

“You think you lot can claim some grand-sounding name at this point? When you were going to put some slave bastard on the throne and manipulate Mephius at will from the shadows, you...”

At that, despite the tense situation, Princess Vileena almost broke into a smile. Manipulating Mephius at will had certainly been her intention when she had travelled here to marry, after all. Currently, however, she had no strategies and no calculations to overcome this situation.

In that moment, strangely enough, Vileena Owell was probably the only one who truly understood Oubary Bilan’s claim to justice. Upholding the model of the legitimate lineage of the royal family, of the imperial family, was by no means wrong in this era and world.

Vileena Owell understood that so well that it hurt. She had herself had only just recently been wrestling with the same problem.

Therefore, did the huge general called Oubary Bilan not look similar to the fourteen-year-old princess? To her? Or did she see in him the crown and throne, the very symbols of ‘justice’ in this world?

Yes, it was strange. For Odyne, a commander from the same country, and for the soldiers, who all kneeled before the same throne, the former general’s actions were nothing but the desperate struggles of a cornered rebel, and the only one there who had any sympathy for him was the single girl from a foreign country.

Which was why she stepped forward. She was also afraid that if they let too much time pass without doing anything, then, just as Vileena herself had said, Flora might be killed. In which case, no would be saved. Vileena had decided that, in Gil Mephius’

absence, she needed to look after the pitiable Flora, and the similarly pitiable Oubary Bilan.

While Oubary's eyes were fastened on Princess Vileena, Odyne surreptitiously exchanged glances with his subordinates. Understanding his silent order, the soldiers spread out on either side and positioned themselves where they could take Oubary in a pincer movement.

The princess was about to take another step.

"I said don't come closer!" Oubary howled and swung his sword horizontally.

"Princess!"

It had only been a stroke to keep her back, but the soldiers drawing up on either side of Oubary immediately cried out. Hurriedly shifting his gaze towards them, Oubary realised the soldiers' intentions and his expression became enraged.

"You bastards..."

Flora shrieked as he pulled her closer towards his chest and once more pressed his blade to her neck.

The next moment, there was a thundering roar and Oubary's feet were floating in the air. But not only his. Vileena, Odyne, Flora and the soldiers, both young and old, all stumbled and staggered as the ground tremored.

At the same time, the townspeople gathered around the great temple started shouting all at once. From right behind the entranceway, separated from them by a staircase, something like the roar of thunder reverberated. Dense smoke was also rising from the same place.

A fire? many wondered. Maybe the rebels, or perhaps Odyne and his men who had entered the temple... at any rate, one or the other must have set a fire.

The next instant, they all of them witnessed the same thing.

Ineli Mephius, who had been sitting on a folding camp stool like a fully-fledged general,

stared blankly. From a crumbling corner of the temple, an air carrier was surfacing.

Yet the silver-gleaming ship did not seem to be taking off under the effects of ether, but was spewing flames from beneath it, and, while smoke continued to roll from the flames, it ascended upwards with a howl like that of a young dragon.

As it rose, the hull shone in the pale light of dawn. The crowds of people who were looking up at the strange ship watched as it took off at unbelievable speed, then, just as quickly, seemed to turn into a single twinkling point in the sky, like a distant star, before vanishing from sight.

When Oubary had pitched forward, Flora had also tumbled to the ground.

With his considerable lower body strength, Oubary managed to regain his balance and reached out once more to grab onto the girl's shoulders. Yet in that moment in which everything still felt numb, a shadow jumped in between them.

Vileena.

Running along the floor as though she was gliding, she was a split second faster to grab Flora's shoulders, before falling sideways to the ground with her.

"Fire!"

It was Odyne who had shouted. Acting on orders, the soldiers fired. This was just after that mysterious tremor, so most of the shots missed, but first one, then two bullets bit into Oubary's body.

"Damn you," not seeming affected by them, Oubary raised his sword. Although his steps were unsteady, one soldier, probably terrified of the approaching figure, was unable to escape and was killed when a blow from the sword crushed his skull, just as his last shot crashed against the floor at Oubary's feet.

"Damn... you..."

Looking for another victim, Oubary again raised his sword high.

Gunshots resounded once more.

In that instant, what did Oubary Bilan, once the general of the Black Armoured Division, see? What did he hear? What did he feel?

The sword slipped from his raised arm.

At about the same time as the dull sounds reverberating from the floor died down, Oubary's huge body also lost all tension and lurched backwards.

Oubary Bilan fell, spread-eagled, and no longer moved.

If the gunshots did not cease, it was only because he had, until the very last, looked as ferocious as a demon.

When the soldiers finally realised that Oubary was dead, silence descended upon the interior of the shrine, and Vileena Owell gazed down at his corpse with an unspeakably forlorn expression. It looked like her grandfather. Like her father. And also like her two brothers, and even her herself.

When Flora Mephius stepped out of the temple with Princess Vileena supporting her by the shoulders, sunlight poured down while the voices of the crowd likewise rained down on her surroundings, sounding to her ears like music from a foreign land.

At some point, the sun had started rising.

Ineli immediately came rushing up.

The first one her older sister called out to was Vileena Owell. They exchanged words together over Flora's head but, either because they were drowned out by the voices of the crowd, or because they had never entered the sphere of Flora's perception in the first place, she was unable to hear any of them.

Then, Ineli's hand stroked Flora's hair.

After a moment's surprise, Flora quickly lifted her head to gaze up at her sister. Ineli, however, was no longer looking at her, and was instead firing off orders to the soldiers who were running up.

"Search every nook and cranny inside the temple. Check whether there aren't any

other suspicious devices.”

Now that she had been freed, Flora did not seem to have anywhere to go. With her parents gone, and now that she had lost her position as the emperor’s daughter, what was left to the little girl?

But the dawn was dazzling, and the morning wind, carrying its hint of coolness, felt good.

Thinking about it, Ineli was in the same situation. That was why she was desperately creating and protecting a place for her to be, and trying to survive in it.

It was the same for Princess Vileena, who had come all the way from a foreign country.

And also for the young man who had once been called a ‘fool’, and who had overcome battles to now become the leader of the Imperial Dynasty.

And me too...

She needed to create a place for herself. With her own strength.

The way her older sister thought and the way she herself thought, their methods and their form, all were completely different, but Flora Mephius could feel the weight and firmness of the decision she had now taken.

Low-hanging clouds floated in the sky but, just as they seemed about to cover the sun, they let themselves be carried off by the wind, looking as though they had lost their way.

PART 3

When Orba pulled his sword from Zafar's corpse, fresh blood stained the ground at his feet. For a moment, there was silence all around.

For the soldiers of Dairan, who had been engulfed in a sudden massacre and then in this nightmarish experience, the skill displayed by Gil Mephius in killing this assailant was almost just as uncanny.

"He was a sorcerer," Orba deliberately stated what did not need to be said.

Although he had only just regained consciousness himself, he could understand the soldiers' state of mind. Facing that mysterious power, what use could swords, spears, or bullets possibly be? Even years of training would surely be useless when confronting the flames and lightning manipulated through sorcery. Such was the fear and turmoil that they were going through.

When he had been facing Garda in the west, Orba himself had gone through exactly the same experience.

"No doubt an assassin sent by Allion. They were probably aiming for Lord Kayness, but changed their target because I was in their way. But, see!" he trod on Zafar's remains, his attitude that of one who would allow no shred of dignity to an enemy assassin who avoided fighting with a sword. "By my sword, he is now a corpse stretched out at my feet. There is nothing that my steel cannot exterminate. And we will make those fools from Allion realise that!"

He lifted his sword high.

The first to roar in response was Pashir. The Mephian soldiers followed, bellowing in turn. And at the sound of their raised battle cries, there was not a single soldier from Dairan who did not raise their own in response.

Everyone there bellowed their war cries and raised their weapons or their fists in the air.

Whatever else might be true, they had won.

Whatever else might be true, the sword had prevailed.

A foreign young warrior had done it, so they could do it to.

Turning his back to the men's weighty roars, Orba leaped onto a horse that had freshly been brought to him. He once again got the troops urgently reorganised, during which time, Hou Ran was taken to safety inside the mansion, and the Baian was returned to a cage by a different dragon handler. Before long, the preparations were complete.

"Well then, I'm off," he addressed Kayness Plutos from horseback then, as though it was the most natural thing in the world, he took the reins and galloped off in the direction of Dairan's north gate. The thundering sound of hooves struck the ground as the other riders followed behind him. Infantrymen armed with guns and spears followed behind them.

Kayness saw the army corps off while hugging to either side of him his two granddaughters, who still showed lingering traces of fear. For the current head of the Plutos House, defender of the northern border, it was of course the first time that he had spoken with, or even seen, Mephians.

A warrior indeed – such was his impression of Mephius' Crown Prince Gil. Although his valour was every bit as great as that of any Dairan soldier, Kayness felt that it was different from that of the warriors of his own homeland. The atmosphere that surrounded the prince was somehow heavy.

His eyes hold shadows – Kayness concluded, looking back on it. He realised that he had that in common with Lord Eric, even though the latter was the very model of a Dairan warrior. It seemed to be an atmosphere that accompanied a young man's resolve to shoulder the burden of an entire country.

Or perhaps it was because they were young that they did not yet know how to hide it.

Kayness was perplexed about how to talk about that to Eric if he returned safely. Although he could brag about having so far guided Eric on the path of a Dairan warrior as his elder, the road that Eric would follow from now on was unknown territory for Kayness, so if he butted in with the air of knowing what he was talking about, he might end up imparting hollow wisdom.

Still being too hasty... for some reason, Kayness felt like smiling wryly at himself.

To the north, Orba's troops were approaching the river that Kaseria's men had crossed, sending up sheets of spray as they did so, about ten minutes earlier. The Dairan soldiers held up torches and indicated where to cross the shallows on horseback.

They started to ford the river, with Orba and Pashir looking as though they were competing to be in the lead.

"Pashir, back off," Orba yelled as sprays of water splashed his face. "Didn't I already tell you this before? When you stick to me like this, it's like you're being a nanny."

"It's not certain that there won't be another attack. If it happens, I'll be there to shield you."

That wasn't actually one of Allion's flunkies – Orba inwardly believed, but he himself had no way of actually proving it. There were still great many points that were puzzling.

Why was it that someone claiming to be Garda's subordinate had been aiming at him and wanting to investigate his real identity? And to start with, was Garda still alive? And if he was, then what was his goal?

Does that mean he's given up on devouring the west and is now reaching out for the centre of the continent?

He could not escape from the guessing and conjecturing. Which was normal given that, for all that he come into contact with sorcery, and had actually fought it, it was hard for Orba to get a firm grasp of this hazy situation.

I'm probably going to need more information.

Since he did not understand their nature, he wanted to at least stock up on knowledge.

However, that was a problem for later and now that battle had already been declared, he had no intention of halting his advance. Such was his style –

Before it starts, be cautious even to the point of irritating your own allies.

Once it starts, be audacious even to the point of panicking your own allies.

– And Orba thoroughly carried it through. So he focused on driving the horses north.

Less than a few minutes after having crossed the river, they were met with the sight of soldiers stretched out on the ground.

“Prince Gil!”

Orba was hailed from underfoot at about the same moment that he pulled on the reins. At first, he did not recognise who it was. The blood he was drenched in blended into the shadows of night, so that it looked like some kind of spectre standing there with only half a face and half a body. Even so –

“Gilliam!?” Orba unintentionally cried out loud.

The familiar giant had wounds all over his face and body. He was propping up his huge frame with the handle of his axe, sandwiching it between the ground’s surface and his own flank, while holding something with both hands. Even without examining his wretched state, it was obvious that the unit had been annihilated.

Gilliam turned a glittering gaze towards Orba.

“This is to my shame. But at least I managed to get this back somehow,” he said.

Sensing that there was something strange about this mood, Orba touched what was being held up to him with shaking hands.

Ah! – His eyes opened wide.

It was an iron mask.

The iron tiger mask, which had been his symbol during his time as a slave, covered the face of someone other than him as blood dripped down. It was as though the mask itself was shedding blood. It felt as though he was face-to-face with his own corpse.

“Who?”

Orba’s voice was reverberating in his own brain, so he did not realise that it had spilled over to the outside.

So when Gilliam replied: “those guys,” and pointed towards the shadows, his startled expression looked as though he had just been pulled back to his senses.

It was Lance Mazpotter's group.

After he had killed 'Orba', they had been swarmed by the Mephian soldiers. They had been roughly equal in numbers, but the disorganised Mephian side, which was attacking in disarray, was essentially levelled by the coordinated movements from Allion's side.

It was also a hard blow that Gilliam, the pivot of their fighting strength, was injured early on. Determined to take back Orba's mask at all cost, he had challenged Lance alone.

"That's the spirit," Lance had accepted. His helmet smashed open Gilliam's helmet and opened a hole in his chest armour. The former gladiator gallantly swung his battle-axe again and again, but it did not even scratch Lance.

Gilliam lost his horse, but just managed to take back the iron tiger mask, and the soldier's head that was attached to it. By the time he realised it, more than half the unit had fallen to the ground as corpses.

With barely the time to catch his breath, Gilliam was about to give the signal for retreat when Gil Mephius' unit had appeared from the south.

Reinforcements have arrived – as soon as Lance caught sight of them, he rode to the northeast. The enemy numbers were considerable. His tactic would be to gradually move towards a position from where it would be easy to withdraw while dulling the advance of the pursuing enemies.

For Lance, this was a well-honed tactic. It was only natural, since he was always assisting Kaseria, who was quick to go wild because of blood. While Kaseria attacked the enemy position and got drunk on slaughter, Lance galloped off to disrupt the enemy forces headed their way, or else divide them in two.

Then –

"Your Highness!" shouted both Gilliam and Pashir.

Still on horseback, Orba had just acted in a way they found hard to believe. Nor was it just Gilliam and Pashir: the soldiers following under Gil were all left astounded. To the two who knew about Orba's circumstances, however, his actions were looking increasingly erratic.

“Oi!” unintentionally forgetting the situation, Gilliam was about to go up to Orba. With blood drying half his face a darkish colour, he was impressive to behold in a way different from usual; but from horseback, Orba knocked him down with a single swing of his arm.

He threw something towards Gilliam’s chest that drew a parabola in the air. The iron mask, however, was gone from it.

“You keep it,” Orba pronounced, looking like emotionless Death itself atop his horse. “Wrap it in a cloak and don’t let anyone see the face. Orba was an iron tiger. That’s all. No one needs to know his real face.”

While speaking those words that contradicted his actions, Orba gave a sharp kick to his horse’s flanks.

Meanwhile, Lance Mazpotter threw a glance over his shoulder. The enemy group was pursuing them. Among them, there was one rider who was especially hot on their heels.

Humph – the One-Eyed Dragon of Atall laughed contemptuously. He once more reached for the spear at his side, gripped the handle in a smooth and skilful movement, then put himself at the ready.

“First Corps, turn!” he shouted, and several mounted warriors simultaneously pulled their horses around in a sharp turn.

The reason why Lance had won fame as the One-Eyed Dragon, and why his cavalry troops had been extolled as the strongest in Atall, was because of how he excelled in circular cavalry movements. Aware of its importance, he had imposed strict training in it on the horses and his men. Even now that he was with Allion, that had not changed.

They let the enemy chase after them, then, when they reached a wider road, they would ‘turn’. One small unit at a time, their cavalry would change direction and charge. The enemy troops would be thrown by having what was undoubtedly a fleeing opponent suddenly face them straight on. Whereupon, Lance’s unit would level them.

This time as well, Lance took the lead with four mounted warriors following behind him. He forcefully spurred on his horse, which, for a second only, had dropped its momentum, and the tip of his spear stood ready, cleaving through the wind raised by

the enemy unit.

Yet the foremost enemy showed no signs of being shaken.

Oh?

It was rare to see someone so bold.

In cases like these, Lance would aim only for that one person. That was because they were the most likely to be the pivot of the fighting force, and once he had destroyed them head-on, the enemy would be thrown into even greater disarray.

They were getting closer to one another.

Both their cloaks billowed in the wind like wings, both readied their spears at the same time.

In a sense, the battlefield was the scene of Lance's normal, everyday life. He had splendidly tamed both his fear of death and his excitement in battle. Even now, with the enemy's bloodlust fiercely washing over him from straight on, he was still calmly measuring his breathing.

And they were at a single breath's distance –

Judging it to be that distance, Lance tightly grasped the handle of his spear – in that moment...

What?

Lance's right eye suddenly opened wide. As for the cause...

Was it because there gleamed on the enemy's face the iron mask of one that should already have been killed?

Or was it because, as soon as the enemy lifted the tip of his spear, he threw it at him with all his might?

While the rider in the iron mask – while Orba – held the reins in his mouth to control his horse, he threw his spear and, in the same movement, drew the sword at his waist. The very action of drawing it turned into a side slash towards the enemy that was right

before him.

Lance Mazpotter had bent forward to intercept the spear. That blow, however, was utterly unexpected.

It should be said that for him to still be able to deflect it with his spear, was something that only a person like him could be expected to do.

There was a clashing sound, sparks flew, and the two people passed each other by.

Not having thought for a moment that the rider would pass by Lance uninjured, it was Allion's soldiers who were thrown into confusion, and they did not go after him. Easily breaking through the enemies, Orba halted his horse's steps and turned to look back.

"Who are you?" Lance loudly called out to him. Atop his horse, he quickly rectified his unsteady posture, but it was unusual for him to raise his voice on the battlefield.

"Orba," the warrior in the iron mask replied. Lance ground his teeth.

"Don't be stupid! I already killed him."

"Well then, you must have failed to kill me," the response was mocking, yet in Orba's case, it was also absolutely true.

Lead by Pashir, the Mephian troops drew near.

Once again, Lance Mazpotter came to a flawlessly correct decision. "Withdraw," he yelled, and no sooner had he done so, than he galloped past Orba's side and left.

Orba did not directly chase after him. He heard about where the northern fort was when Kayness had explained the situation, and guessed that the main battlefield was probably somewhere around it.

"We continue," his raised voice was angry.

To the east, the sky was starting to grow light. He took off the iron mask which sharply reflected the light of dawn, and raised it high.

"The hero Orba sacrificed himself to give us this victory. Do not let it go for nothing. We will give chase to Kaseria Jamil's troops!"

CHAPTER 8

SWORD

PART 1

Lord Eric of Ende had also already cast himself into the free-for-all fight.

Although the armour of the surrounding Endean soldiers was lined up to shield him, one after another gasped for breath, then fell at Eric's feet, spitting up blood. At first, Eric had wielded an axe but, with an enemy blade approaching, he had cast it away and used his sword to repel the enemy's blow. Meanwhile, the ferocity of Allion's Prince Kaseria had not abated in the slightest.

Opposite him, Ende's soldiers were, of course, trying to kill the enemy commander-in-chief; but just when you thought that Kaseria was only looking ahead of him, his body would suddenly twist to avoid a spear coming from the right, or sometimes, he would slash backwards while his horse was in the very act of jumping left.

Was a direct confrontation between the two commanders-in-chief already close at hand? Kaseria was moving ceaselessly, constantly killing enemies. Slender though he was, he did not seem to know fatigue.

Although Eric himself was an outstanding warrior, in this situation in which he had been driven to a wall, his impatience was growing out of control. All the more so as the flames rising from Dairan were still glowing red in the distance. And that impatience was robbing him of his physical stamina to a remarkable degree.

Then –

“Nooow!” came a high-pitched yell.

It was Kaseria. As soon as he had gauged that one side of the enemy line had collapsed, he charged into the crack. His cloak billowed behind him like an ominous banner, dark crimson and almost slimy from the enemy blood it had absorbed.

“My lord, go to the rear,” cried a soldier standing by his shield, but he had already retreated as far as he could. Then, the soldier who had cried was dealt a blow to the

head by Kaseria, and collapsed without another word, his throat pierced through.

“Got you!” Kaseria called out, his entire face gleeful.

“No, Now I’ve got *you*!” Eric yelled in return.

Sword crashed against sword.

“Dairan will fall, Lordling,” laughed Kaseria.

Eric was a master swordsman, and it was because he had been hoping for it that the prince of Allion laughed. Partly to provoke the enemy to impatience, but also simply because he found this kind of exchange fun.

“The men will all be enslaved to Allion. The women will be given to the soldiers on the spot. The children should sell for a good price in the coastal countries.

Never – Eric’s only response was a fierce glare. He was only barely able to repel the iron sword that aimed downwards towards his shoulder. Next was the crown of his head. Somehow, he managed to defend against that too, but Eric’s posture was unsteady.

Every single blow seemed to reverberate within his entire body, stinging through his flesh and bones. Since Kaseria’s build was not large, his sword did not have ‘weight’, but his unerring aim towards vital spots, coupled with the speed with which he unleashed it, gave the weapon a ‘sharpness’ that the sword of soldiers who took pride in their own strength did not have.

Even though we’re descended from the same dynasty...

“Exactly,” Kaseria laughed again, as if had been reading his mind. “That’s why Allion will be taking it. Land, fortune, culture... and people.”

Kaseria’s sword had been forged by Valkess, Allion’s greatest craftsman. Said in life to have been loved equally by the spirits of flames and of water, it was claimed that, if wielded by a talented owner, the swords created by that master blacksmith could cut through boulders without receiving a single nick.

And now, Eric’s sword snapped right in half. Kaseria struck his next blow without even pausing. Eric desperately drew back his head, but his shoulder was sliced into.

It was to his credit that he did not cry out, but he would not be able to sustain another blow from the sword that Kaseria was raising overhead.

Kaseria's – Allion's victory was fast approaching.

Just as he was thinking so, Kaseria sensed a 'presence' surging like a wave behind him. One that he knew.

There had been one or two of Eric's men who had come rushing up when they had realised the danger that their young lord was in, but one of them had been dealt a blow with an axe for having turned his back on his opponent, while the other was too far to make it in time.

"Lord Kaseria!"

From beyond the mêlée, a messenger was crying out as he galloped towards him. His attention caught by that, Kaseria found himself obstructed by soldiers who had interposed themselves between Eric and him.

"I'm here!" Kaseria called in annoyance.

"Enemy reinforcements from Dairan – It's a raid!" The messenger's answering voice came through a curtain of swirling dust. "Mephian forces. A large number of enemy riders are closing in and they're flying Mephius' flag!"

"Mephius?" the same groan came from both Kaseria and Eric. Moreover, the image of the same man flashed through both their minds.

And in the next instant, Kaseria Jamil lost himself in delirium.

It felt as though a sharp piece of iron had buried itself in his forehead at some point, and it was now unexpectedly giving off heat, as though to remind him of its existence.

Is it him?

When he had been on the verge of checkmating Dairan by taking its inner keep, that man had stopped him. And on top of it, that man had brought a sword down on him.

It's him!

For the second time, that man appeared just as he was about to end things. Humiliation and anger once more heated that iron fragment. And with it, he could not hold back his laughter. It seemed as though the man had only chased after him to offer Kaseria an easy chance for revenge.

He turned his back on Eric. In a flash, he was whipping his horse and, without giving his men a single order, he forced his way through the confused mass of enemies and allies. He drove away any obstructive soldiers with a sword swung left and right. Be they from Ende or from Allion, Kaseria currently made no distinction between them.

The ‘presence’ that he had felt coming from behind him had undoubtedly kicked up that cloud of dust that was making straight for him. Just then, the ground’s surface started to glisten white. With pale light as its backdrop, the approaching troop had that young man in its lead.

Almost unconsciously, Kaseria grabbed the torch that one of the common soldiers hurrying behind him was carrying, and lifted it above his shoulder level. He saw himself as a guidepost for the enemy.

“State your name!” he called out sharply. “I am Kaseria Jamil, first prince of the Kingdom of Allion. If you want my head, then state your damn name.”

“Gil Mephius, crown prince of Mephius,” replied his opponent. Compared to Kaseria’s voice, his tone had a quiet calm that seemed to soak into you.

Yet in his eyes burned the unmistakable flame of fighting spirit. He cast aside the spear that was under his arm and, still on horseback, seemed about to draw his sword.

“Oh, Mephius’ prince?” Kaseria too quickly threw away the fire.

The flame was still tracing an arc in mid-air when Kaseria urged his fine horse to lunge forward. Gil Mephius did the same.

The scattered sparks flying from the discarded torch seemed terribly slow.

In the sky, the nebulous light of dawn was starting to erode the darkness.

In that moment, on a battlefield where the fighting had turned into a free-for-all and chaos had reigned, the ‘wind’ in which was mixed the fighting spirit of friend and foe alike suddenly stopped blowing.

It was like a scene from a play: from the right, Kaseria eagerly leaned forward, spurring on his horse while, from the left, Gil likewise bent forward, his horse sprinting.

Foaming at the mouth, both horses rushed wild, their eyes starting and squirming, and each reflecting the oncoming figure.

In an instant, the sword belonging to the commander-in-chief of Allion's troops flashed, and the sword belonging to Mephius' commander was swung.

Sparks flew from the clash of steel.

Even as they were passing by each other, they struck again.

Once distance divided them, both turned.

They would clash again.



This time, both slowed their horses' steps when they were within point-blank range of one another and exchanged strikes and thrusts.

Coincidentally, the torch which Kaseria had thrown away earlier was still lit and at their feet as they crossed swords.

The two blades gleamed scarlet, bathed in the light of the flames, and trailed an afterglow behind them as they collided again and again.

The power and skill both competed with was astonishing. The two of them were well-matched.

"Kuah!" sounds like the cry of an ominous bird escaping from his throat, while Kaseria freely sprang about.

Replying voicelessly, Gil Mephius' sword repelled it.

Gil was fighting no defensive fight however. He attacked as soon as he saw an opening. From the right, from the left, from overhead, from below. Yet his opponent's vital points were already no longer there. His head pulled down, his chest pulled back, his sword raised, Kaseria too skilfully parried.

At first, Kaseria felt a heat at his forehead as though his brain was being broiled.

Fury.

Hatred.

He felt that if he left this man alive here a second time, then he would never sleep peacefully again. That iron fragment that pierced deeply into his forehead would forever more project this man's scornful smile before him. Whether in the middle of making love to a woman or simply while sleeping, every time that mocking smile would come to his mind, Kaseria would leap out of bed screaming, and only by whipping the backs of hundreds of slaves, and maybe occasionally beheading them, would he be able to distract the ache in his blood amidst the rising screams and pillars of blood.

Although it had only been a one-time chance encounter, that was how deeply-rooted the prince of Allion's conviction was.

Yet, blow after blow, as he took his enemy's attacks and had his own strikes repelled, while the countless sparks flew before him, even Kaseria's fury and hatred vanished like the mist along with the ring of steel colliding with steel. Thoughts and emotions lost their shape, their meaning lost all use, and Kaseria himself was now no more than the sensation of steel being swung and engulfed in battle.

Unaware even of his own breathing in this fight that he had wholly cast himself into, somewhere at the back of his mind, Kaseria thought that this was just like *that* time.

It was just like the day that he had first grasped a sword.

From the time he had been born, nothing had ever fulfilled him. He had been constantly irritated. Feelings that he could not identify raged inside him like a tempest and, so as to not miss a single opportunity to release them, he snarled at everything he laid eyes on.

When Lance Mazpotter had been assigned to him as a sword instructor, Kaseria had vehemently protested. He would rather have bitten off his own tongue than be bound by another's orders. And then, Lance thoroughly trounced him. And just like now, every time Kaseria had attacked to the very limits of his strength.

Back then, Kaseria had also experienced the feel of losing his own form. Fury, irritation, pride – all had vanished within the sparks raised with each beat of the clash of steel. Was that how so many cultures, once considered great in this world, had faded?

Since then, Kaseria had gone to the battlefield, and fought in the vanguard for no other reason than to taste again the excitement and exaltation of that almost unattainable sense of unity with the sword.

Of course, Lance was still his mentor. In terms of simple skill with the sword, he was a step above Gil Mephius, with whom Kaseria was currently clashing. With Lance, however, there had been no 'intent to kill' for a long time now.

With Gil, this was undoubtedly a struggle for survival. Which was why he was pulled into this whirlpool of murderous intent born from conflict. Even his feelings melted as he became one with that whirlpool and seemed to be swallowed up by its centre.

Meanwhile, Gil Mephius – or rather, Orba – had also fallen into the same mental state.

Competing like this in power made this moment feel incomparably sweet. He was entranced, his body was almost shaking from the delight of being re-awakened to the feeling of throwing himself in that gap, no wider than a single thread, which lay between victory and defeat, between life and death. He forgot about the crown prince's mask and about the Grand Duchy of Ende, yearning to be absorbed in the world of the 'sword'.

Just like Kaseria, the flesh and soul known as 'Orba' were already collapsing, and the dark blood that was seeping out as they did so drew a spiral to which he gave himself, feeling himself being absorbed into the whirlpool of violence.

And yet –

As he parried Kaseria's sword for perhaps the tenth time, he felt a scorching heat at the back of his head.

The dazzling sun was overhead.

Cheers rained down incessantly.

Orba's breathing was a little disordered.

Which was also when he noticed for the first time that someone's hand was touching his shoulder. Suddenly, forcefully, that hand pulled him back, as though to keep him away from the whirlpool of violence.

Shique.

Orba started, wide-eyed. Was it an illusion born of the dust cloud conjured by the wind from the swords? The owner of that invisible hand was the beautiful gladiator, Shique.

No sooner did he wonder if a ghost had come to him than it turned into Gowen's brawny arm before just as quickly transforming into the soft, white hand of a young girl.

Each time all of those arms seemed to pull Orba to them, scene after scene of those countless death matches he had experienced were seared into his mind even as they were torn from it.

Right... That's right...

With the whirlpool approaching right before him, Orba realised anew.

That fighting, sword in hand, was his only way to keep on living. That had been true, both in the arena and after he had become the crown prince's body-double. The instant he let slip the split-second chance for victory, he would be stretched out as a cold corpse. Now, however, this was not his fate alone. Once before, at the forest of Tolinea, he had realised that the fight was not his alone.

The moment he realised that, Shique's face, which had become blurry from the flurry of dust, broke into a smile. Gowen nodded. The girl, looking elated, let go of his hand. The thunderous black blood stopped drawing a spiral within Orba.

And with that, his five senses, which had been sharply tied together in their focus, now flew loosened and extended in all directions.

The next second, Orba almost imperceptibly shifted his horse's position, purposely escaping to the front. Kaseria saw an opening in his opponent. He immediately had his horse leap to fill the gap so that he could slice the space where Orba would move to.

A fresh surge of fighting spirit instantly battered against him.

Pashir had charged, spear in hand. Waiting ready in the rear, he had realised that Orba had left that gap for him.

The attack pulled Kaseria back to himself. He hurriedly jerked backwards and watched, astounded, as the spear whizzed by right before his eyes.

"Coward!" Kaseria howled.

Even though he had finally achieved that feeling of ecstasy in which it felt as though his body and mind would melt, it was as though he had been doused with cold water just as he was reaching its peak.

Atop his horse, Orba smiled scornfully.

"So young."

"What!"

"As long as I take your head, there'll be no question of cowardice. I'll just have it

advertised that I fought Allion's prince fair and square in a duel, and magnificently killed him."

For all that he was younger than Kaseria, Orba had, in a sense, lost his youth, and what he had said fit in with his way of doing things.

Although Kaseria's face was flushed, having come back to his senses, he could grasp what his own situation was.

At exactly that moment, Lance Mazpotter came galloping up, having been searching for the prince's whereabouts.

"Pull back, pull back, Prince," he shouted as he had his horse rear bolt upright. "If you don't pull back, you'll have to face me too, Kaseria. I told you earlier. I'll haul you away even if I have to drag you. Do you want to look that pathetic, Kaseria!?"

Kaseria Jamil had suffered his second defeat that day. And at the hands of the same opponent. Roaring something unintelligible, he fiercely kicked his horse's flanks.

PART 2

“Go, give chase!”

“This is our chance to win!”

The Ende-Mephius alliance pursued after Allion’s army as it started to flee.

On Allion’s side also, it seemed that the commander-in-chief, Kaseria Jamil, had decided to resign from this battle front, so the officers were calling out to each other, leading the chorus of cries to withdraw.

Once one side started to retreat then, as a matter of course, the balance of battle would collapse in one go, and those of Allion’s soldiers who fell behind by even a little were intercepted by enemy soldiers and suffered the penalty of death. Amidst that, Lance Mazpotter personally took his spear to serve as the rear guard and allow their commander to escape.

“Get them, get them!”

They chased on and on. Now that victory was decided, the desire to kill a famous enemy and claim the reward had spread like fire. With things having come to this, there were quite a few soldiers who charged recklessly to seize Lance’s head, only to be killed instead.

At that point in time, Allion was not resigned to being defeated. There were still a thousand soldiers who had been left in the north, in Zonga, and on the east side were the troops led by Phard Chryseum. Although Mephius’ intervention had temporarily placed them at a disadvantage and caused them to abandon their position, they intended to immediately regroup their battle formation.

However... Phard had also been forced into an unexpectedly hard fight.

When Dairan went up in flames and Garbera’s troops inevitably moved west, Phard had been hot on their heels, but Moldorf, the commander of the force sent by the western alliance, stood in his way. Just like Kaseria, his younger half-brother, Phard was a fearsome commander who had fought a hundred battles without ever knowing defeat, but he was now faced with an opponent stronger than any he had known before. Moreover, Moldorf was intent on single-handedly keeping him in the same

place.

As soon as he had drawn Phard to himself, the troops led by his younger brother, Nilgif, had gone ahead and were stalling for time.

On Moldorf of Kadyne's rapid instructions, the Pinepey tribe were deployed along the path of retreat to provide protective fire. Assisting them were the cavalry commanded by Natokk of Taúlia and the infantrymen under Bisham of Helio.

"Eei, move! Move, why don't you!" Phard opened his mouth wide to roar, as the horses' hooves kicked up untold amounts of dust and sand.

There was a loud clang and sparks rose from his iron shoulder guards. A bullet had rebounded off of them at an acute angle, yet his massive form did not even stagger.

Phard had already slaughtered more enemies than could be counted on the fingers of both hands. Yet the enemies that he should normally be able to kick aside like ants when he went on the offensive were beyond persistent.

Moldorf and Nilgif especially, whose huge frames were every bit as large as Phard's own, and who both excelled with the spear. Not even an invincible army would rush thoughtlessly to attack that pair.

As for the Twin Dragons, they too were looking at this enemy with wonder.

"What do you think of finishing that opponent?"

Once, when the two brothers passed each other by as Moldorf temporarily retreated and Nilgif advanced, the older brother called out.

"If there were a few less enemies, right about now, that guy's head would be on the tip of my spear. And you, Brother?"

"He's strong. Spending too much time on him will put our side in danger. If either you or me were defeated, the enemy would gain the momentum to overwhelm the Garberan forces. Don't go competing with me for achievements by paying too much attention to him."

"Got it."

Although Nilgif fell a little short in judgement when compared to his older brother, he was not one to lose control of himself in situations like these where there was a clear goal. He was not so young as to be ardent about reversing a situation with his spear alone.

While the Twin Dragons were buying time, the Garberan troops led by Prince Zenon had escaped from the valley and were reforming their battle array. When they had first managed to reach that position, Zenon had been planning to divide his forces into small units and deploy them so as to gradually slow the enemy's progress while they contacted those in Dairan. Yet shortly thereafter, a messenger had arrived by airship from Dairan.

"Ha ha!"

The young Garberan prince had still been on horseback, but when he heard the report, he had flung back his head with laughter.

According to what he heard, Lord Eric had launched an incursion against the enemy position so as to reverse Kaseria's trap, but during that time, Dairan had been attacked. Following which –

"Gil Mephius."

Just as he said, Mephius' crown prince had materialised and rescued them from their predicament.

"It was the same thing back then with me. But really, that crown prince, does he always know, whatever the situation, when to make the most effective entrance? If it's him, I'd even be willing to believe he was pulling everyone's strings, enemy or ally, from behind."

Zenon summoned the apprentice knights under his command and had them notify the entire troop of the situation. He lifted his longsword, engraved with the crest of Garbera's royal family, above his shoulder –

"There's no longer anything to be worried about. If the enemy advances any further, our swords will force them back."

Within the next half hour, the troops of the western alliance also filed through the narrow path one by one and joined the Garberan army's position. Moldorf and Nilgif

were at the very end of the line.

At long last, Phard Chryseum was going to follow after them, but seeing the enemy unexpectedly take up a firm position at a point not very far away, he naturally thought it strange. Anyone would have viewed it as unnatural that they were not retreating further even though their own base was burning.

“Bastards. Don’t underestimate me,” Phard gave a deep snort.

That they had been able to slow him down somewhat had gotten him wound up. The iron balls jangled on their chains. Readying his personal weapon, and after making sure that the entire force had regrouped behind him, he was about to give the order to charge again.

Which was when –

“Lord Phard.”

“Whaat?” he shouted, rearing back his horse until it stood bolt upright. He was so stirred up that he almost plucked the head of this soldier who seemed about to get in his way. However, he heard the soldier’s words, which had been prefaced with “a message from Master Morga...”

“What?” Phard was flabbergasted. With his eyes opened round and his mouth hanging open, his face was exactly like a child’s. “Running away? What’s that stupid little brother of mine doing? Didn’t he take Dairan?”

He was visibly displeased, but the commander-in-chief for this expedition was Kaseria. Besides, Phard was a man who displayed his might in battles of brute strength, even when his situation was at a disadvantage, but once things grew even a little complicated, he was not one to use his head to think.

“Unh, unh, unh,” while the message from the sorcerer continued, his face puckered but, this time as well, he ended up abandoning any attempt to think through things on his own. “Eei, well then, retreat, retreat,” he yelled, his face as red as though boiling water had been splashed over it.

Phard’s true worth and greatest strength lay in how he made swift decisions and took immediate action. And when Phard easily abandoned the battle and started to flee, his subordinates hurriedly followed after him.

“Good,” watching this, Prince Zenon went into action.

They did not give chase. He left most of the troops, including those from the western alliance, where they were and personally led five hundred cavalymen towards the north, going by way of Dairan.

At that same time, Kaseria Jamil, who had likewise taken the route north. Although there were several possible opportunities to counter-attack, the combined troops of Gil Mephius and Ende’s Lord Eric bore down on their positions every time.

Both the side being chased and the side giving chase were covered with sweat and blood, and their faces were black from the dust being kicked up by the cavalry troops. Kaseria was no exception. He continued on horseback while his skin, which was normally so white it reflected the sun, was dyed dark.

“Garberan then that damned Mephius...”

He had heard that the situation in the three countries, Ende included, was explosive. Which was why he had been resolute in his decision to advance troops, despite his father’s resistance to the idea. Ende’s Lord Jeremie, who had called for Allion’s army, had said the same as well.

Then how was it that they were cooperating like this? He did not believe that this was a spontaneous military alliance.

“I didn’t hear of anything like this!”

Meanwhile, once they reached a point a few dozen kilometres north of Dairan, Gil called a temporary halt to their side’s advance. Garbera’s unit joined up with them at about the same time.

While Mephius’ Crown Prince Gil, Ende’s Lord Eric, and Garbera’s Prince Zenon drew up their horses side by side, Kaseria’s main force continued north in a cloud of dust.

The sun rose in its leisurely ascent, and finally filled the entire surroundings with its rays.

At long last... There was no doubt that the one who felt the most deeply moved, as he bathed in the sunlight, was Eric Le Doria.

The shadows cast by the three lined-up horses grew longer on the ground's surface.

"I'm sorry." Lord Eric was the first to speak. "I was fooled by the enemy's trick. My foolish decision caused trouble to Garbera and Mephius. I was determined to drive them back with nothing but the platoon I was leading, but..."

Bearing responsibility for an entire country was not easy. Eric fell silent, feeling that it sounded like he was making excuses.

"What's that?" Prince Zenon clapped Eric's shoulders comfortingly. "That's how skilful Allion is in warfare. The problem doesn't lie with Ende. If Garbera had been the one they had set their sights on, we would also have needed help from the both of you. Isn't that right?"

Asked that pointed question, Gil Mephius nodded.

"It probably isn't over."

The morning atmosphere was clear and calm. The festival of blood which had swept through the wilderness only a short time earlier with its shouts, angry roars, and rising smoke, was already far away. The morning sun washed away the previous day's filth, and a new day was starting.

"Mephius included, there'll be cause for cooperation again from now on."

That cooperation could no longer be limited to three of them, but needed to be extended into an alliance between countries – such was his meaning. Neither Zenon nor Eric raised any objection.

Of course, there were still many things that needed to be settled and done for that to happen.

Now, with this war only just drawing to a close, Gil Mephius – Orba, was already turning his eyes towards his 'home country', Mephius.

Kaseria arrived back in Zonga on the evening of the next day. Messenger airships having been flown ahead, ships had been sent out to meet him near the national border.

Onboard the return ship, Kaseria did not speak a single word.

Once at the port of Zonga, his adjutant, Lance Mazpotter, was kept busy organising the returned soldiers and checking their numbers, but his priority should originally have been elsewhere. Not having anticipated that was possibly the greatest mistake that he made in the war.

When Kaseria Jamil arrived at the port, he swiftly headed for one particular place.

It was a house at the end of a street of warehouses. Incongruously for the location, it was under heavy guard by armed soldiers. Allion's soldiers. "Move it," Kaseria bit out before violently wrenching open the door, paying no further attention to the soldiers who had stepped away to either side, visibly intimidated by their lord's mood.

He trampled roughly towards a room at the end of the second floor.

Lord Jeremie Amon Doria was inside. Even though it was still early morning, the room was filled with black water lily smoke. Or perhaps, thanks to that drug, he had been escaping from reality since the previous evening, practically without sleep.

Jeremie had stared with lifeless eyes at the prince's entrance, but now opened his eyes wide in apparent astonishment.

"G-Goodness, Prince Kaseria," his long-stemmed pipe fell from his hand and he hurriedly sat upright. "It seems that you were gone this past while, but where have you been to?"

"To Dairan," Kaseria smiled. A smile so gentle that anyone would have smiled in return.

Jeremie looked startled all over again, but then his face gradually broke into a smile.

"R-Really? And then? And then, what happened to Dairan? No... since it's you, Your Highness Kaseria.... Did you cast those allies' of Erics to the fire? And from now, with Dairan as our base, those who oppose my reign can be utterly..."

"Yes, sooner or later," Kaseria gave a slight nod and, still smiling, moved his hand to his waist. "Sooner or later, I'll turn Dairan into a sea of flames. I swear by the royal blood of Allion. But before that..."

"Before that?"

A gleam of silver streaked/flushed from Kaseria's waist. Did Jeremie Amon Doria even realise that these were his final moments? Spinning rapidly, his newly severed head rolled until it stopped before a grimy mirror placed in a corner of the room. His lifeless eyes gazed impassively at his own death.

"First is your blood. Filthy as it is, it can't possibly sate my thirst but, well, might as well while I'm at it."

Without a single uneven breath, Kaseria wiped off the blood on a curtain, then left the building at the same pace that he had entered it.

Just under two thousand of Allion's soldiers left the port of Zonga. Up until that time, Gil, Eric, and Zenon had set up position north of Dairan in order to intimidate Allion's forces, but once they received the information that Allion's army had set sail, soldiers throughout the camp had raised their guns or spears high, and had burst into loud victory songs.

It was at around that same time that they were joined by the western forces, which had confirmed Phard's retreat. General Moldorf wordlessly went up to Gil, and just as wordlessly, they bumped fists.

"What's this, Brother," coming up behind him, Nilgif tilted his head. "When did you get so close with Crown Prince Gil?"

"First-class warriors understand each other after just a single day of being in the same camp," Moldorf puffed out his broad chest, while next to him, Orba gave a wry smile.

For the present, Allion had suspended going to war with Ende. However, just as Orba had pointed out, this did not signal the end of Allion's – and consequently, of Kaseria's – ambitions.

Future generations would call this campaign the "Dairan Disaster". It was the first of many battles to come between the "Mad King of Allion", Kaseria Jamil, and the "Dragon Emperor of Mephius", Gil Mephius.

PART 3

They returned victorious to Solon.

By all rights, fireworks should have been booming since morning and throngs of people should have gone out to greet them, but it had not yet been five days since the announcement of Emperor Guhl's demise. In order to observe mourning, the people were forbidden from wearing bright colours, while taverns, brothels, arenas, and any other entertainment venues were to remain shut.

Despite his achievements and the hopes for the future that the people held, the hero who had rushed to aid the Grand Duchy of Ende, and who had repelled Allion's expeditionary force quietly alighted from the ship which had landed with an equal lack of fanfare.

Naturally, he had been informed of the emperor's death before he had returned. It had left Gil Mephius – Orba, lost for words. He listened in silence to the detailed explanation.

Guhl Mephius had been bathing in a puddle of blood on a cold stone floor. There was no clear information as to whose hand had killed him. However, slightly less than ten people, including elders of the Dragon Gods' faith, the empress and Zaas, had afterwards fled in a suspicious air carrier believed to have been concealed beforehand within the temple. It was certain that they were responsible.

Guhl...

Is dead.

Most of the retainers understood Orba's silence as grief over the death of his father. Yet – needless to repeat at this point – Orba and Guhl were not related by blood. The circumstances to which each had been born were wildly different. They had barely even spoken face-to-face from the time he had become a body-double, whereas his life had been targeted more than once. However, saying that Orba had simply pretended to receive a shock and then sink into silence would also be incorrect.

Orba had, in fact, experienced shock. It was similar to receiving a serious injury.

But whether what he was feeling was a sense of loss because victory had been so

abrupt, pity for the pitiful dictator, or perhaps even regret that he had not personally killed him, Orba himself could not tell.

The enigmatic feeling followed him even after he had disembarked in Solon.

With a mourning token^[4] attached to the coat he wore over his armour, Orba was met by nobles of his acquaintance who were similarly clad in mourning, but they barely exchanged any words. He merely stopped to sweep his gaze over all of their faces and give a brief nod.

It's so sad.

Just as had happened on-board, everyone understood that Crown Prince Gil was grief-stricken.

He won the war, then his father died just as he was returning triumphant and victorious.

Although they'd led soldiers to wage battle against one another, they were still father and son.

And his lady mother has already passed away.

No matter how heroic he is, the Lord Crown Prince is still young. It must be so hard...

Ineli Mephius was at the centre of the group of nobles. He was aware of everything that she had done in Solon. Calling both her and Odyne forward, Orba said only a few brief words: "You did a good job looking after things."

Afterwards, he did not return to his own chambers but instead went somewhere as though to avoid the public eye.

The Black Tower soared above the centre of the city of Solon. The shrine to the Dragon Gods had once been housed beneath it. Normally, before the ceremonious funeral, the remains of royalty should have been laid out in state in the temple where that shrine had now been moved to. However, that place was what it was, and the elders who managed the temple were now viewed as those responsible for dividing the country in two, as well as being suspected of having murdered the emperor. Which was why the corpse had been transported to the underground morgue beneath the Black

Tower.

This had been reduced to an almost cylindrical cavity. The paintings, gorgeous ornament, and sculptures of the successive generations of emperors which had once lined the walls on both sides had been transferred to the temple.

While the tapping sound of his footsteps echoed, Orba walked along alone, holding a torch aloft.

The sound of footsteps stopped.

He could see the temporary altar which was all that had been carried from the temple. A coffin had been quietly laid out.

Orba stood still for a long time before it, neither opening the lid nor approaching any closer than necessary to the casket in which his 'father' slept.

Somehow, now that things had come to this, he felt that there was a lot that they would have needed to say.

For example, maybe there should have been words of reproach. For so long, the emperor had been unable to distinguish between his real son, and the impostor that Orba was. For Orba himself, he felt both that it was a relief and, at the same time – or *rather* – that he would have wanted to reveal his own identity, and fling all of his reproaches to the statesman who had robbed him of everything.

Or perhaps he would have wanted to receive instruction on all sorts of things from the one who had ruled for so long, and who, for all his faults, had so much experience.

Or perhaps he would have wanted to assert his intention before the emperor that from now on, he would take care of the country in his place, like a true descendant of the imperial family.

That was something else that not even Orba himself could tell for sure.

"Who are you?" only Guhl's voice as he had asked that question continued to reverberate within Orba's mind.

Well then – Orba mentally asked in return – *who were you?*

Thinking about it now, the emperor, who never trusted or let others into his heart, was the very image of a lonely old man. Yet Orba's own heart violently opposed the thought of neatly summing up the emperor's last years with just those few words.

This was the man who had held the throne of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius for many long years. Despite innumerable conflicts, he had held fast to most of its territory. He had defended his people with high stone walls and the might of the sword. These past few decades, at least within the cities, barely anyone had known starvation. Even if the price for that prosperity had been the emperor's despotism and the lives of several hundred, or even several thousand slaves, it was impossible to feel that the life of a man who had reigned, with ups and downs, over an entire country could be understood just by saying that "he was lonely."

Shit – Orba kicked at the stone floor, aware of his own inner turmoil.

Orba knew what it was like for the sacrificed slaves, for the populace on the very bottom rungs, who were held down and suppressed through force. It didn't need to be said that he himself had been one of them. And so –

It's fine for me to laugh.

It's fine if I spit on your coffin and kick your corpse. It serves you right. A slave that you thought was worthless... no, whose existence you didn't even recognise, is going to grab everything that you cherished during your life, while all you can do is curse and grind your teeth in your grave...

Even though he tried to work himself up, his emotions did not reach half the pitch he had hoped for, and he was not even able to grasp a genuine sense of having finally won. And more importantly –

Where did Guhl go wrong?

However much he tried to manipulate his own feelings, that question stayed with him and would not vanish from his mind. It irritated him.

Where did he go wrong, where was it?

It's because of what he did wrong that the retainers grew arrogant, and looked down on the people and slaves like something to be harvested in the fields each year. And the result was that my home village was burned down, I lost my brother, my mother was killed...

It's because of what he did wrong that so many men died before me. That there were people I had to kill.

Even if he were somehow to never more have a reason to grasp a steel sword, the smell of blood would never fade from Orba's hands. The colour of entrails torn from inside a body, the appalling stench of them, would never disappear from his memory.

Within that darkness in which there was nothing to lean on, Orba had firmly trampled on those sacrifices, one step at a time, as though walking along a road. His guidepost had been the thought of revenge, its flame constantly flickering right before his eyes.

And yet now that he had finally arrived where he had been going, he had, at the same time, lost sight of that flame.

No... Orba sighed deeply – it didn't just start now.

I'd already lost sight of that flame after I defeated Oubary.

A new voice then asked a question within Orba.

So then, *why did you come this far?*

I know.

It hadn't been to bring down Emperor Guhl. It wasn't a simple, fairy-tale-like story, or a play in which the last scene was overthrowing the dictator.

Orba took a deep breath as he realised that anew.

"Fool."

Orba neither laughed nor kicked the coffin, but simply spoke.

"You should have gone all the way with being a ruthless ruler. The kind of ruler who would want ten slave sacrifices today and a hundred tomorrow. It would've been great if you'd been an emperor who seized all of his retainers' assets, then started wars all over the place to stifle their complaints."

Was it because Orba's eyes were filled with the black shadow that had abruptly risen from the coffin that they were so dark even as he spoke curses?

It had human limbs. The shadow did not have any facial features, but Orba was certain that he could sense them: an unmistakably powerful gaze. Along with words being spoken.

Orba pretended not to notice. He continued to speak –

“If you had, it could have continued to serve as a guidepost to the future. Intending to carry everything all alone. You’re...”

Me.

Whose voice was it that replied?

The road you are advancing along is the one that I followed. The road I travel is the one you once walked.

Step by step, the shadow came closer to Orba. He could neither escape from it nor fight it. His eyes wide open, Orba could only watch as the shadow gradually turned gigantic, and prepared to swallow him whole, from the top of his head to the tip of his toes.

“Were you able to talk with His Majesty?”

A voice spoke from behind him. At the sound of that gentle voice filled with hidden strength, the shadow which had been one second away from pouncing on Orba scattered and vanished like the mist.

Orba turned around, looking as though he had just snapped out of a dream.

It could not have been sorcery. The one before him was Vileena Owell. For all that she was an oddball princess, she could not hide sorcerous power in her voice or her kiss, like Hou Ran.

Besides, Orba had realised the identity of the wraith-like shadow about to strike him a moment ago. Although of course, he did not know that Emperor Guhl Mephius had once experienced similar conversations himself, both within his own room in the main palace, and in the underground of the temple to the Dragon Gods’ faith.

“Am I bothering you?”

“No,” Orba shook his head.

He stepped to one side to leave a space for her beside him. Vileena, however, stopped a step before that. She gazed at the coffin placed in front of the altar.

“His Majesty Emperor Guhl Mephius was not easy to understand.”

Only a single light illuminated the semi-darkness. Vileena’s eyes shone bright. She scrunched up her eyebrows.

“He threw a retainer who had admonished him to the dragons, promoted gladiator games in which fellow slaves were made to kill each other, and turned his blade against my native country, Garbera. In that, the gentleman was unforgivable. Yet when I talked directly with His Majesty, he was like a completely different person from the one who had done those things.”

“...”

“When we watched the gladiator games together, he made a bet in fun with me. Then, when I brought up that bet and asked for soldiers, he readily agreed to it. Even though I was almost suffocatingly nervous during every second that I spoke with him, in no way did I hate him. If – although talking about it won’t make any difference now – but if we had just a little longer, if we could talk some more, it might be possible to shorten the distance with him, even just a little, and to understand him maybe just a little bit more. I keep thinking that.”

“Me too,” answered Orba as he too looked towards the coffin. “Now, I also think that. He was an unforgivable ‘father’, with a lot that needed to be corrected about him. But, he was, after all, the emperor. He was the one who showed the way that I needed to take from here on.”

“Empty talk,” Vileena Owell said softly and closed her eyes. Tears ran along her cheeks, but Orba again pretended not to notice. “Thinking that now is truly pointless. Why didn’t you spend more time with your father before having to regret it?”

“Because with a father like that he wouldn’t even have listened to me.”

“No, no,” this time, it was the princess who shook her head. “Did you make any effort to understand your father? And did you even make any effort to be understood?” Her tone was approaching one of cross-examination. Orba did not answer, and Vileena once again shook her long hair.

“It’s too late after something like this has happened. Much too late. When words haven’t even run dry but you decide that you cannot understand one another, you’re inviting a situation like this, in which father and son, brothers, or mother and daughter fight against one another. There are already so many cases like that. People from the same country spill each other’s blood, family members who share the same blood turn their blades against one another, I’ve had enough already.”

“Princess...”

Vileena buried her face in her hands. It was as though she had been intending to talk matter-of-factly but, before she realised it, had been overwhelmed by her feelings, and, one after another, tears fell from between her white fingers. When he tried to place a hand on her shoulder, Vileena shook her head fretfully, shaking his hand off at the same time. The princess sniffled.

“I don’t want to have to regret anymore. I don’t want to be bitterly sorry and bite my lips and stamp my foot like a child when it’s already too late,” the princess fervently complained, sobbing like a child.

Now that I think about it... Orba suddenly realised something as he stared at her profile.

Right, now that he thought about, Vileena was a girl who had witnessed internal battles again and again. She had not even been ten years old when a man named Bateaux, who was supposed to be a leading figure among Garbera’s long-time retainers, had rebelled right before her eyes. She and her grandfather, Jeorg, had been taken hostage, but they had prevailed thanks to her grandfather’s tact and the princess’ ability to take action.

Then, no sooner had Orba and Vileena met than they were dragged into the drama of the Garberan general Ryucown’s similar rebellion. He had been none other than the princess’ former fiancé. Grieving over the future of Garbera and of chivalry, he had even raised his sword against her.

Even after she had come to Mephius, internal conflicts occurred one after another, with Zaat Quark’s attempted uprising, the war between Mephius and the west which were supposed to have become allies on the prince’s decision, and now, the civil war between father and son. Although Orba himself did not know it, back in her native country of Garbera, a quarrel between her two brothers had also been on the verge of

intensifying.

Innumerable motives intermingled. To carry through the justice one believed in, to satisfy one's own ambitions, out of worry for where one's country was heading... That selfishness of men gave rise to the clash of violent emotions, and bloodshed became inevitable, which had also left the princess' emotions in disarray. With Emperor Guhl Mephius' death, she had probably reached a kind of saturation.

Orba realised as much, yet at the same time –

“What you're saying really isn't like you, Princess.”

The words that came out of his mouth came off as sharp. And, as was to be expected...

“What do you mean by ‘not like me’?” the girl glared at him with red eyes. “What do you know about me?”

“What makes you think I don't know?”

“No, you can't know. You have no interest in anything except yourself and victory in your own fights. You show no concern for other people or topics,” the princess flatly stated.

Orba desperately bit back the wry smile that almost appeared on his face.

“It isn't too late for everything. It's true that my father and I ended up with this miserable result because we wouldn't understand each other. But, standing in front of my father's altar like this and leaving my emotions to one side for the first time while thinking about him, I wondered. I wondered about what kind of things my father, the emperor, had done until now, and what he had been thinking of doing from here on.”

“...”

“That might not have been possible when my father was still alive. If we had continued with our usual relationship – sounding each other out with our words, cautiously observing each other's expressions – I probably wouldn't have had an opportunity to think particularly deeply about him. I won't say that it's a good thing that my father died, but it definitely gave me that opportunity.”

“But... But. That's too lonely. To think of someone for the first time when you've

already been separated by death, that's just too..."

"There's no fixed shape for the relationship between people. The process that leads to understanding each other and sympathising, the method, and the result... they vary. Understanding each other doesn't only mean happily taking each other's hand. Understanding each other absolutely perfectly could lead you to mutually trying to erase the other's existence from this world."

That's... Vileena's voice disappeared into a faint sob, unable even to form into a murmur.

Orba gave a nod. "I understand what you want to say, Princess. There are plenty of situations where fighting comes about because people don't understand each other, or because misunderstandings have piled up. That's what happened with the war with the west after I disappeared. That's what happened between Garbera and Ende. For those involved, that's certainly very sad and heartrending. Deeply grieved over it, the fourteen-year-old princess sobs in front of her hateful fiancé."

Maybe because he had deliberately gone and said that, or maybe because he had failed to say something else, he found himself on the receiving end of another glare from the princess. As she turned her red and swollen eyes towards him, Orba grinned.

"But, Vileena Owell. You aren't just 'a fourteen-year-old princess'. You can't be. Or, at the very least, the Vileena that I know – the girl who was my trustworthy comrade, who was an opponent I couldn't be careless around otherwise she would do me in as soon as my guard slipped, and who twisted me around at every opportunity – she wouldn't be crying and complaining at a time like this, but would look at me with a cool expression."

What are you... Vileena's eyes asked. Their redness added to the intensity. Orba received that glare head on and straightened his posture.

"Prince, from now on, the two of us, let's create a country which tries to understand others even after words run dry. No, you have to. If you don't, I, Vileena, will never forgive you and will chase you down with a gun..."

Vileena gaped open-mouthed as Orba imitated a woman's voice to speak. He then watched as the princess' face instantly flushed redder, perhaps from anger, or embarrassment, or a mixture of both, and while it did so –

“And like that, you draw out my heart, Princess. The twisting, winding, complicated road I follow becomes so very simple thanks to you,” he said almost in a whisper.

Vileena’s eyes went perfectly round. The smile Orba was wearing closely resembled the expression she had once caught a glimpse of in the evening glow, lit up by its flaming light. And then –

“Vileena, you’re adorable.”

“W-What...”

Unable to keep up with what he was saying, Vileena did not even notice that at some point, Orba had placed his hands on her shoulders. The torch that he had been carrying was now hanging on the wall. As the light coming from it shone to one side of his face, he continued –

“You’ve shown me how you look when you’re sobbing and falling apart. A clever princess like you, must have already realised how I look when I’m in that state too – right, like someone said before, I’m sure you’d see me as childish. We haven’t spoken much. We haven’t spent a lot of time together. But compared to when we first met, I’m sure I’ve learned a lot more about Princess Vileena, and that I’ve come to respect that princess, that I find her a difficult person to deal with, and that, sometimes, I think she’s a girl I feel at peace around. How about you, Vileena?”

“I... I’m... I am... I, also...”

“For the two of us, we’re different in that we were born in separate lands, we’re a man and a woman, we honour different values... but, it would be good if we could lower the fences between our different positions, one by one. It’d be good to create a country in which everyone had a chance of doing that. That’s what I’ve resolved on, after losing so many things in so many battles. As long as you, Vileena Owell, just you shared that thought, nothing could make me happier. Nothing could be more reassuring.”

“...”

Vileena’s face was now as red as a glowing sunset. Any kind of blockhead would be able to tell that the reasons for that were different from earlier, but it was at that moment that Orba let go of her shoulders.

Ah... said her face as Vileena followed his hands with her gaze. Her expression was one

of having only now noticed the touch of his hands for the first time, and of only now being bewildered about why her shoulders were so hot they were almost burning.

Orba took half a step back.

“Emperor Guhl was undoubtedly a very great father,” he said.

For a second, Vileena was perplexed all over again at how he seemed to be going back to that topic at this point.

“Even if I don’t inherit all of that, unworthy though I am, I, Gil Mephius, will carry it as best I can. However, even if Mephius currently has a father, it has no mother.”

As he spoke, Orba suddenly got down on one knee.

While the crown prince bowed his head far more deeply than he had when, not so long ago, he had been before Emperor Guhl, the princess held her breath.

“Lady Vileena Owell, third princess of the Kingdom of Garbera. Proud princess, would you become Mephius’ mother?” he asked.

Vileena finally lost all power of speech.

The single light threw their two shadows against the stone floor from which frescoes had clearly been torn off. Each time she seemed about to say something in reply, Vileena struggled for breath and gave up. She repeated the process several times.

Orba did not move.

Not speaking, he remained kneeling.

It was less than a few minutes that passed, but how long did it seem to the two of them?

As might be expected, Orba was beginning to feel conscious of sweat forming on the back of his neck.

“My lord prince,” a voice landed on top of his head.

Orba did not show any expression.

“Is that all you wanted to say?”

“...”

“I feel that your words are missing something. It can’t have been your intention, my lord prince, to embarrass me by saying something like this to me – who is, after all, a girl – and watch my face burn red with shame?”

Orba silently stretched out his knees and stood up straight.

Vileena’s face was right before him, a little lower down.

He opened his mouth which had previously been shut.

He knew, of course.

What it was he needed to say. He had known that since long ago.

Yet now that it had come to it, his back was throbbing.

At some point, the fire hanging from the wall had spread to his body, and it felt as though his back was blazing hotter and hotter.

His back was burning.

His brand was burning.

His slave brand was burning.

“Princess, I...”

The flame erupted violently from his back and engulfed every direction around him within its scarlet veil.

But only for a moment.

There was only a fleeting moment in which Orba closed his eyes then wrenched them open again.

He once again focused straight ahead of him.

Vileena Owell's countenance was before him.

His wavering gaze, in which countless emotions struggled against one another, met her eyes and in that moment, the flame went out.

"Princess, I definitely need to talk to you."

"Right," Vileena nodded decidedly.

"It will probably be a long, long conversation."

"Even so," she smiled brightly. "Your Highness, we have time. From now on, we have a long, long time ahead. But I am not patient enough to spend all of that time waiting. You *do* understand, right? Your Highness?"



EPILOGUE

IRON AND BLOOD

What more is there to tell?

It would be a little too inelegant to go over the broad lines of all that the Dragon Emperor Gil Mephius did thereafter, whereas there are too many small anecdotes to count.

So, let us wander idly for a little while. Following our whimsy, let us list some scenes from different points in time after the ‘Dairan Disaster’ that involve various people connected to Crown Prince Gil.

First off, Fedom Aulin.

It could be said that it all started with him. Even before Gil Mephius’ coronation as emperor, he loudly appealed for the Council to be revived, and successfully persuaded Crown Prince Gil, thus achieving this grand ambition. However, with the Emperor’s demise bringing fear of internal instability within the country, it was not easy for him to withdraw from his position as domain-lord of Birac. Because of this, despite obtaining the title of Chairman of the Council, he could not readily go to Solon and spent some time irritably kicking his heels.

Meanwhile, the one who consolidated her political base in Solon was, needless to say, Ineli, who had actively undertaken to serve as a bridge between Gil Mephius and the retainers. Although she had lost her position of princess and had gone back to her real father’s mansion and name, as Ineli Montori, she would hereafter become more and more deeply involved in Mephius’ politics. Among later historians and storytellers, opinions were divided as to whether her future turned out as she herself had hoped.

By the way, Fedom, who climbed to the highest civilian positions in Mephius, and who was rumoured to have discerned Gil Mephius’ prodigious talent even back in the days when his surroundings called him a ‘fool’, continued until well into his later years to be a retainer who both supported and persistently nagged the emperor. “One of these days, he’s going to drop dead from having his food poisoned,” the emperor’s

attendants often heard him mutter.

Let us next take a peek at Nedain.

Walt – who would later become one of the twelve generals – and his troops were stationed there, and so was Raymond Peacelow, who would become the domain-lord in the future, so that Nedain was in fact the most stable region in the country around the time of the “Dairan Disaster”. The populace bragged of how they had toppled the ‘tiny tyrants’ – the Abigoal father and son – with their own strength, and even as revolts and slave uprisings erupted throughout, they unwaveringly flew the Crown Prince’s flag.

Gil Mephius was greatly pleased by it, and it was probably because of it that Nedain, a rural backwater, would one day share a deep connection to him, second only to Apta. Raymond Peacelow became lord of Nedain about five years after the “Dairan Disaster”, and this honest, steadfast young man remained Gil Mephius’ greatest adherent. It was even said that he was the first to refer to Gil as the “Dragon Emperor”.

Here is one trifling episode handed down within the Peacelow family. Half a month after Gil’s return from Ende, Raymond had to leave for Solon to attend the Emperor’s funeral, which was to take place in the imperial capital. As he was just finishing his preparations for departure, someone came hurtling down the stairs.

“Brother!”

“What is this Louise? That was a disgraceful display for a daughter of the Peacelow House.”

Raymond’s reproach turned to confusion however when his sister handed him a white origami. After all, a pale paper flower already decorated his chest as a charm for safe travel.

“It isn’t for you, Brother,” Louise said, looking bashful.

Raymond looked from the folded flower, which was a size larger and considerably more intricate than the one at his breast, to his little sister’s reddening cheeks, and realisation suddenly dawned on his face.

“I-It’s no good. Your social positions are too far apart. I understand your feelings, but he has an official fiancée. Even though it’s painful, considering our House’s situation, there’s nothing to do but give up and...”

Lousie’s face got redder and redder as he spoke.

“Brother, you’re an idiot! This is to thank him and to give him a protective charm. I... the Crown Prince – I wouldn’t even dream of something so outrageous!”

Hearing her shout so uncharacteristically, the servants who had gathered to see Raymond off burst out laughing.

Now then, let’s wind back time a bit and cast our eyes west of Apta’s river, to the territory of King Ax, who became the leader of the Tauran alliance.

In a room adjacent to the audience chamber, Ax had received a messenger sent by the Twin Dragons of Kadyne, and had heard all about the battles in Ende. The next to visit the room after that messenger had left was a civilian official that had been dispatched to Mephius. He reported in detail about the disturbances which had arisen in Mephius, and about how things had ended.

Also present were the strategist, Ravan Dol, Ax’s daughter, Esmena, and the young general, Bouwen Tedos.

“Guhl’s croaked?”

Ax was not particularly tender-hearted, but he could not hide the strong emotions he was feeling. During Guhl’s reign, Ax had three times invaded Mephian territory, and had twice been attacked by Mephius.

Guhl was what you might call an old enemy. And he had died. It was as though someone had just handed him fertile lands budding with new life.

The next instant, Ax had snapped out of those deep emotions.

“We’ll need to send someone to offer condolences, huh. How about you, Esmena? Feel like going to Mephius again after all this time?” He fished for his daughter’s reaction.

“If you insist, Father, I will not go against you, but I believe that General Bouwen here would be a more suitable messenger. I do not understand politics,” Esmena smiled gently and shook her head.

Ax looked surprised: he had expected her to jump delightedly at the offer.

Soon after, this daughter of his, who was said to have suddenly become all grown-up, excused herself and left the room. Ax spent a little time feeling despondent.

“If the problem was politics, she could just have gone with someone who knows about them. It’s just as they say: a girl at that age is quick to change her mind. It’s like a newly-hatched dragon, which everyday grows more scales than can be counted.”

“My lord, the saying about a dragon’s scales means that you should be careful for three days after parting from someone who served you. The comparison to a woman’s feelings is different...”

“R-Right. I was just testing your knowledge.” Ax forcefully shut down Ravan’s interruption. “Still, on our side, my nephew Raswan did what he did, and in Mephius, Princess Ineli’s lost her title. I was thinking of getting the princess for Raswan or Bouwen in exchange for Esmena, but now I’m going to have to reconsider. The one who takes over Taúlia has to be of the blood of the Bazgan House, after all.”

“Although if we’re talking about not letting the bloodline run out, I think it would just as good for you to take a concubine, my lord.”

“Me and my wife, Jaina, are both still young. Don’t you worry.”

Despite his forthright personality, Ax was uncomfortable talking about this sort of thing in front of his retainers.

Once the conversation was over, Ravan and Bouwen saw him off as he returned to his living quarters. Immediately after which, the strategist turned to Bouwen Tedos.

“Your patience has paid off, Bouwen.”

“Whaa-W-What is it that you mean?”

“There’s now a high chance that Princess Esmena will marry a man from our own country. I bet you’re hesitating about whether or not this is the time to put your name

forward.”

“W-Why are you... No, what are you talking about?”

“You’re so brimming with spirit, it’s like steam is rising from your entire body,” the strategist chortled loudly. “It’s nice to see that kind of youthful spirit. Do your best not to jump the gun and keep training your self-control.”

Ravan gave Bouwen a clap across the shoulders strong enough to make the younger man stagger, then left the room. The young general gazed bitterly at his receding back. Although the old man gave the impression of knowing everything, he had long ago lost the feeling of how it was to be a callow youth.

Speaking of the west, Helio was a land that shared a deep connection with Orba.

It was from this country which had suffered so many national crises, and in which the royal family had solidly built the foundation of its rule, that Bisham, a commander of infantry, had gone to Ende as part of the reinforcements. The first thing he did upon returning was to go kneel before Rogier Helio.

The young heir to the throne was not yet ten years old. The boy was delighted to hear Bisham’s many tales of the war, but grieved deeply at the end over the death of one hero.

Nor was it only Helio: news flew around the western lands that the masked hero Orba, who had slain Garda, had perished in battle. People all over mourned his death, but nowhere was that sorrow greater than in Helio.

When the commander of the dragoons, Lasvius, was sent to Solon to offer condolences for the Emperor’s death, he talked far more of Orba than of the Emperor when he met with Crown Prince Gil. This made a deep impression upon Gil, and he entrusted Lasvius with a gift for Rogier: the iron mask that Orba had worn in life. For long after, it remained in the keeping of Helio’s royal family as a national treasure...

Yet even so, there were numerous theories about the true whereabouts of Orba’s mask.

Some said that Crown Prince Gil had faithfully kept it close to him, others that he had

enshrined beneath the Black Tower as a guardian spirit of Mephius, and still others claimed that it had been lost on the battlefield when Orba fell.

And to start with, it was extremely difficult to investigate what had happened to the iron mask that Orba wore, or even how many he had owned, given that innumerable master blacksmiths in Mephius and in the west displayed and sold replicas during town festivals.

It was not only Taúlia's King Ax who was hit with strong emotions when he heard that Guhl Mephius had passed away: Ainn Owell, king of Garbera, and his son, Zenon, felt much the same.

He had been their opponent in a war that had lasted ten years. When Ainn received the news, sitting back in his throne, he looked towards the heavens and sighed.

"So in the end, were we never to meet face-to-face?" he was said to have murmured.

Although Guhl was an old enemy who had once sworn to have his head, they were to have their son and daughter marry in the near future, and would have become family in-law. It was hardly surprising that he was at a loss for words.

Within Garbera at the time, there were some people who worked themselves up into a commotion, saying that "this is the perfect chance to rule over the three countries."

In both the neighbouring countries of Mephius and Ende, those who had for so long worn the crown had died, so both were now having to spend time building the foundations of the new regime. Put another way, since the countries were at their weakest, a single prod from Garbera's spears might be enough to snatch lands from Mephius and Ende – an opinion which was not, however, openly expressed.

Prince Zenon Owell and the resourceful Noue Salzantes did a lot of manoeuvring and laying of groundwork around that issue. They both agreed that what was needed now was to ascertain how Allion would move and to strengthen the relationship between the three countries, and so they had already gathered to them those who shared that opinion. When Zenon had repeatedly been urging his father to send reinforcements to Ende, these retainers had not been able to support him for fear of opposing the first prince, Razetta. Now however, they themselves took the initiative of jumping on board with Zenon and Noue's position.

Truly, all was not smooth sailing in Garbera. In the future, when a child would be born to the king and a concubine, the relationship between the two princes, Razetta and Zenon, would change once more. Although Crown Prince Gil of Mephius, Grand Duke Eric of Ende, and Prince Zenon of Garbera all yearned for a triple alliance, little progress was made with it, and it could well be said that the main reason for that was because of the situation in Garbera.

Zenon would take concrete action one year later, during what went down in the history of the eastern part of the continent as the “Battle of Ryalide”, a fight in which he earned fame by overturning the enemy’s overwhelming superiority in numbers. The prospect of a retaliatory Garberan invasion of Allion was then hinted at, but at that time, there was no such grand ambition or desire for power within Zenon Owell, and that was no doubt due to Gil and the similarly-aged Eric, as well as to having fought Allion first-hand during the “Dairan Disaster”...

Having touched upon Garbera, we naturally have to mention the Grand Duchy of Ende, cornerstone of the triple alliance.

Immediately after obtaining overwhelming victory in the “Dairan Disaster”, Eric Le Doria returned to Safia in triumph. A huge funeral ceremony was held in Dairan for the people and soldiers who had died, but Eric simply spent a night in the Water Shrine and reported their victory to the spirits which protected Ende.

During the time spent in contemplation, Eric’s feelings raged. Although he was praised for his great victory, he felt responsible for the severe damage done to Dairan. Included in that damage was the loss of his close friend, Belmor Plutos.

“My son died a good death,” Kayness Plutos was sprightly as he saw Eric off. “I’m proud of him. I can’t count how many of Dairan’s soldiers absolutely want to name their next son after him.”

Astride his horse, Eric simply smiled faintly.

Belmor had given his life to allow Eric to escape during an enemy attack. When they found him afterwards, his body was riddled with bullets, yet even so, the spear he still held in his hand was covered in the blood of enemy soldiers. The sight of the two sobbing children clinging to Kayness was still seared into Eric’s mind.

Absolutely... the next...

While greeting the morning sun at the Water Shrine, he turned Kayness' words over in his mind.

Eric became the grand duke three months later. It is said that although he became a great pillar for the country, the birth of "Valiant Grand Duke Eric" was one of the causes that led to Ende's disappearance.

Well then, listing everything would be endless.

When it comes to things related to Orba, Ryalide, which was mentioned just now, is not unconnected to him either. For example... counting even the small-scale confrontations, Mephius and Allion led their soldiers against one another more than six times after this, but Gil Mephius and Kaseria Jamil only confronted each other face-to-face on two occasions, one of them being the "Dairan Disaster". But in the treasured history books which have been handed down within Ryalide's royal family, it is written that there were "three occasions". This is clearly no mere slip of the pen, since the princess of Ryalide of that time frequently made reference to it. Just what the historical truth behind it was is something that future historians and story-tellers delighted in puzzling over.

Anyway, there are too many to count.

So for now, let us once more return to Solon.

At the centre of this story were always Gil Mephius and Vileena Owell. Here is an anecdote illustrating what the relationship between the two of them was like just before their wedding.

Just before noon one day, Princess Vileena went to Crown Prince Gil's room.

Ah! – Dinn had been cleaning the room along with several pages, but his expression changed when he heard her footsteps. Fundamentally, he was an honest boy. And he was still making that same expression when he faced Vileena.

Half a month later, when the wedding was held, Vileena would be fifteen years old. Theresia, her lady's maid, followed behind her.

“Is His Highness not here?”

“Eh... W-Why do you ask?”

“Is there any reason to ask why? I came to give him my greetings, is there any problem with that?” Her piercingly probing words belied her flowerlike countenance.

Looking back on it in the far distant future, Dinn would often wonder – *Did my lady^[5] have a spy among us?* That was how good she was at sniffing out that something was up.

This time, however, Vileena had come without any hidden intentions. Dinn’s suspicions about her motives were probably due to his own guilty conscience.

“Oh?” Vileena also sensed something was up.

Dinn saw her eyes flash, but he was too slow to dodge.

“O-Ow...”

Vileena’s fingers were pinching the poor chamberlain’s cheeks.

“P-Please have mercy.”

“What are you hiding?”

“N-Nothing... nothing.”

“You are lying. Now come, confess everything. What is he plotting this time? Has he gone to town disguised as one of the people, or to scout out enemy territory where war might break out soon, or else...”

For a second, Dinn stared blankly, wondering how the princess had already arrived at war preparations, after which, he ‘confessed’ all. Gil Mephius had left early to go on a long ride on dragonback with Hou Ran. Ravan Dol, from the west, had apparently sent several dragons of a new breed in place of a wedding gift. Once he heard about them, the prince could not sit still and had immediately gone with Ran to test them out, keeping it a secret from his surroundings.

“You should have just told me from the start,” Vileena finally let go of his cheeks.

“Lying badly just makes everything seem more suspicious,” Theresia dealt the finishing blow.

Dinn could only hang his head.

Theresia glanced towards her mistress. *Honestly*, said the princess’ expression, but Theresia could tell that she was uneasy. In a sense, Garbera’s princess would have been relieved if he had been secretly preparing for another battle.

Incidentally, the young lady’s maid who had followed the princess for such a very short time was no longer in Mephius. Soon after the “Dairan Disaster”, the princess had gone once more to Birac and had bid farewell to a family which was leaving the city for the west. Who could say if she had done so after obtaining Prince Gil’s permission, or if the princess had acted at her own discretion.

Either way, from then on, the woman named Layla would never again be seen in Mephius.

With his wedding and coronation ceremonies soon to be held, Gil Mephius organised large-scale gladiatorial games. He wanted a slew of blood and flesh from brawny sword slaves to offer in sacrifice to pray that the deceased emperor, Guhl Mephius, would rest in peace, and to usher in the new era.

“However,” Gil spoke before the courtiers assembled in the hall, “for three hundred days after my coronation, I forbid slaves from fighting to the death as gladiators.”

He addressed himself to those who were making a stir.

“It seems that if too much human blood is offered too quickly to them, the Dragon Gods get a little tired of it. I do not believe that a person’s death is a good omen. The people, though, are starving for entertainment. Therefore, I have decided that each domain-lord and general would send soldiers to take part in these gladiator games. I suggest you each bet money, goods and pride on them. Of course, the winner will receive what was bet, and will earn unsurpassed glory. Since the intention is also to train soldiers for future wars, a necessary condition is that opponents will not be killing each other. Even if the people complain for a while that there isn’t enough blood, watching soldiers compete against one another for the honour of their lords and generals will, in different ways, be far more exciting entertainment.”

It is not known whether at the time, Gil was already considering the Proclamation of Emancipation that he issued ten years later.

That's right, ten years.

As Gil Mephius, Orba took a long time – so long that he felt that he was writhing in agony considering his own origins – to accomplish his goal. He took into account that Mephius would collapse if it lost its military and labour workforce in one go, and since he also wanted to avoid causing dissatisfaction among the influential nobles and the populace, for the time being, he limited it to “three hundred days”.

On the day of the great tournament,

“Now, begin.”

There was not a single cloud in the clear, blue sky. From the seats reserved for the imperial family, Gil made his announcement as he spread both hands wide.

“These games are to appease my father's soul, and are also in praise of the hero who saved Mephius from peril time and time again. The one who achieves the most outstanding victory shall be granted the title of ‘Orba’.”

The stands were packed so full there would not even have been enough room to fit in a single dog, and the people were in fever-pitch of excitement. After this, there would be no gladiator games for three hundred days, which only increased their frenzy. Increasing it even further was the fact that merchants involved in the gladiator business had sent in all their famous fighters, hoping to please the man who would become their new emperor.

Among the merchants who offered him his greetings, there was one that Orba recognised.

He never learns.

Still, this was the merchant who had produced ‘Orba’, so he summoned Tarkas before him and spoke with him directly.

The sun was high overhead. While the light and heat from it beat down on his head, the crown prince seemed entranced as he watched the innumerable massacres that unfolded before him.

At dusk, Gil Mephius looked down onto the gladiators who had been selected to come and line up before him. Blood and sweat clung to each of their well-forged bodies. All of them had displayed outstanding skill and strength during the day's many fights.

Gil called each one in turn and granted them the prizes which had been provided by the nobles. Golden ornaments, swords and spears created by master craftsmen, extravagant horse tacks... one especially lavish noble had even provided a manor as a reward.

Among the gladiators being rewarded, there was one young man who was still in his teens. At his age, he could still be called a boy.

Orba bestowed upon him an Imperial Guardsman's spear. It was a magnificent thing, partly made from dragonbone and decorated with silver embellishments.

It happened in the instant when the boy respectfully took hold of it.

His eyes flashed a sharp glare, then he heaved it back with all his strength before instantly hurling it forward.

The spear whistled through the air as it flew towards the crown prince.

No one even had time to scream.

The flash of silver split in two in front of Gil Mephius.

Pashir, at his side, had swung his sharp blade at almost the same time as Gil drew and brandished the sword at his hip. Whichever of the two swords it was which had stopped it, the spear was sliced in half and both parts rolled to the ground.

Screams and angry bellows erupted immediately afterwards. While Solon's stadium seemed to tremble as they swelled, soldiers held the boy to the ground.

"Enemy!" he screamed. That bastard was his enemy, let him kill his enemy he hollered again and again at the top of his lungs.

Gil Mephius spread out both hands towards the seats to show that he was unharmed.

Once the people had finally calmed down, "Why throw away your own life?" he asked the boy before his eyes.

His arms and legs pinned down by burly soldiers, the boy twisted his neck upwards. Although death was already before him, his eyes gleamed with the feral light of life.

“My father was a Mephian soldier,” he spat out a mouthful of sand, “but he was killed by fellow Mephian, by your – the Crown Prince’s – troops!”

“Oh.”

The boy who had sworn revenge had apparently come into contact with the troops from the Emperor’s faction who had been laying waste to villages and towns during the time when Guhl had been held captive in the temple. It was then that he had been captured and reduced to slavery.

“Get down here,” the boy yelled. “Get down here and meet me with a sword. I’ll kill my father’s enemy!”

“This bastard!”

One of the soldiers who was holding him down grew enraged and struck him in the back with the butt of his spear. This time, the boy coughed not sand but blood.

“Enough,” said Gil. He turned towards the boy who had once more lifted his head. “You wanted me to go down?”

His face was as devoid of expression as if he had been wearing an iron mask.

“I will not step down. That would be ridiculous. Where would you find someone fool enough to step down from the heavens for some failure of a slave?”

The nearby courtiers all snickered quietly at the crown prince’s words.

Gil’s sword was still unsheathed and this time, he was the one to throw it down to the arena. It unswervingly pierced the ground right before the boy’s nose. He went pale.

“I’ll give you that sword. You can keep your life for another three hundred days, until the tournament for the resuming of gladiator games. If you fight and survive with that sword, then...”

Gil Mephius smiled with cruel callousness, “you can come crawling up to me.”

The sword piercing the ground shone a brilliant red.

It looked like the colour of blood.

AFTERWORD

The world that “Rakuin no Monshou” is set in is, ‘of course’, an imaginary planet but, as the number of volumes and of characters increased, the images that only vaguely existed in the author’s head gradually expanded and, coupled with Master ‘3’s’ illustrations, there was a sense that they started to depict ‘an image of reality’.

Well, that might be exaggerating a bit too much, but basically, the point is that the stage on which the author’s wild ideas could play their parts was gradually completed.

But, still... As it did so, the setting for the various countries and the final shape of the overall world played out a little differently from what they had been when I first started.

Once the ‘words’ were released from my fingertips, even if they went beyond what I had intended at the time, they took root in this world’s solid ‘ground’, and would not allow me to change them without a very persuasive reason. For example, since I wrote that “Mephius and Garbera had been at war for ten years”, that history could no longer be altered. By the time an episode occurred to me about the imperial prince and royal princess of those two countries playing together as young children, it was impossible to incorporate it into the story.

Once this world of ‘words’ solidified, I am forced to grope for ‘words’ that fit in with that world. I can no longer carelessly toss out ‘words’ like I did when I first started, when this world had not yet solidified. I have to constantly keep the full picture in mind, and choose my ‘words’ carefully. That really is back-breaking work.

But, you know.

It’s also true that it’s fun. Building up an imaginary world, having the people living in it fight, make up, love, part... basically, drawing their lives. For a writer of fiction, you could say that nothing else is quite as much fun.

And now, it seems that the time for having fun in that gradually built-up imaginary world is coming to an end.

With this twelfth volume, “Rakuin no Monshou” had reached its conclusion.

Although I can't exactly say that I haven't thought of the possibility of nonchalantly relaunching the series in a year or two's time after simply changing its title to something like “Brand of the Demonic Emperor” or “Empire of the Branded”, or whatever, and declaring that “Part x 2 Finally begins!”... but as the author, my current feelings are that I plan to end it here.

Now that the series has reached its conclusion, let me take the chance to express my gratitude a bit.

First to my editor, who supported this work from the shadows in so many ways.

Then, to the illustrator ‘3’, whom I did not have the chance to meet in person even once during the twelve volumes that we worked together. It seems like only yesterday that we agreed in our preference for women. “Rakuin” didn't have that many opportunities for women to appear on stage, but if I have the good fortune to work with him again, I'm determined that this time, I will avenge my honour (?).

And of course, thank you to all you readers for all of your support and encouragement up until now.

Everyone first met Orba at the Ba Roux arena.

It is already time to bid farewell to him and to the world that we looked at through his eyes.

And while the author is finding it hard to shake off this desolate feeling...

Let's meet again somewhere.

--- Sugihara Tomonori

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Rickets is a childhood condition caused by serious vitamin D deficiency, which leads to the bones weakening and softening, and which in turn results in slowed growth and stunted skeletal development. Nowadays, it is perfectly treatable, but back when it wasn't, it could leave people deformed for life.
2. The soldiers are described as wearing kozane, a type of traditional Japanese armour made by lacing small scales made out of leather or metal. Worn mainly during the Heian period and pre-Sengoku period, kozane armour is fairly "old-fashioned" in terms of samurai armour. More information [here](#) and [here](#) (under 'Classical Armour')
3. The kanji stand for "the land of barbarians" (蛮人たちの地) and the furigana read "barbaroi". As an added note, "barbaroi" is ancient Greek and was the name given to other cultures, who were usually seen as uncivilized by them. It was later adopted by the Romans (as was most of Greek culture) and is the root of the modern word "barbarian".
4. Traditionally, people wore mourning badges attached to the breast of their clothes in Japan, but the custom of wearing an armband has also been adopted along with western clothes, so it's unclear what, exactly, Orba is wearing.
5. This future Dinn uses the term "okukata-sama" (奥方さま), which is a respectful way of addressing someone's wife, usually used for the wife of a master or employer.



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